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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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Spring Forward

By now you have either seen *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, you don't care, or you live under a rock. This issue gives us our first glimpse at what makes any film truly great, and that is a Lego version from the wonderful TT Games.

Some were dissatisfied with the film (I, too, found some things to nitpick), but to me the film ultimately delivered. Not only did it make great use of the beloved original cast, it introduced a new band of heroes and villains that I fell in love with immediately. I'm eager to learn more about them, and more importantly, play them in games.

For the collectors out there, we have two covers, one featuring the villain Kylo Ren and another with Rey, who just might be my new favorite *Star Wars* character (though Han Solo will always have a special place in my scoundrel heart).

After you get your *Star Wars* fix (pg. 36), make sure you check out our Games of Spring feature (pg. 58). It's great to see so many outstanding games landing in the first half of the year. I for one am dying to play far too many games on that list.

Finally, you should read Dan Tack's opinion on virtual reality (pg. 34). Not because I agree with it entirely, but because it is a good counter perspective on the upcoming VR deluge. I was a little disappointed by the \$599 launch price tag on the Oculus Rift, but it doesn't change my stance that VR is a major part of our gaming future; I will be jumping in with both feet despite the cost. But I realize the cost is prohibitive for many, and I think getting as much data as you can will help you decide which side of the fence you fall.

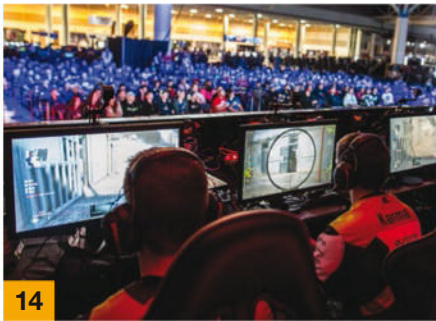
Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens

The Force Awakens has made its mark in the film world by being one of the biggest movies ever, period. Now it's time to invade the world of video games. TT Games is returning to the galaxy far, far away for the first time since 2011, and we have the exclusive details. **by Jeff Cork**



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Gamer: The Blind Man Who Beat Ocarina Of Time



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The Games Of Spring



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Oculus Announces Rift Price



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Gear: Figures Roundup



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» 8 Feedback

Much in the same way the technology itself is divisive, readers wrote in to both complain and congratulate us on our in-depth VR coverage. Readers also review our Fallout review and are still holding out hope for Kojima's Silent Hills.

» 14 Connect

We take multiple looks at eSports this month, as well as VR's impact on CES 2016. We also find out how someone without sight was able to conquer The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time.

» 68 Previews

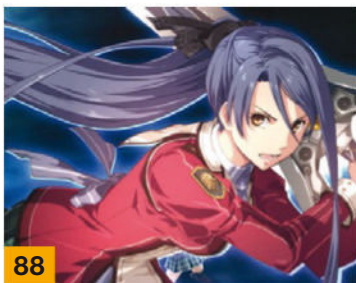
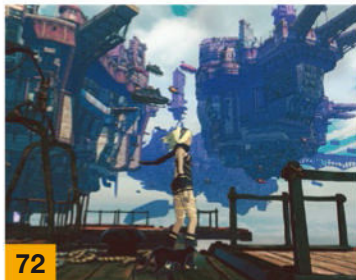
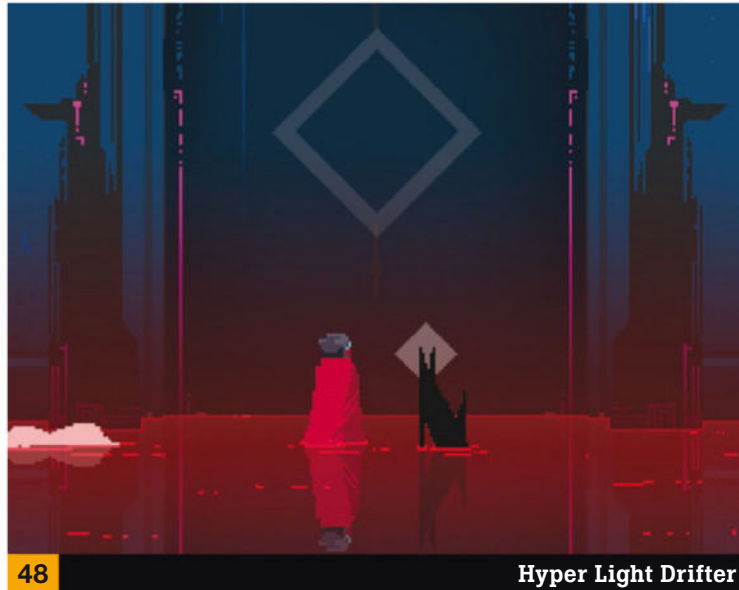
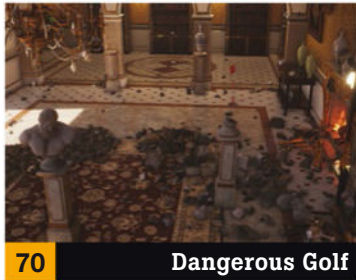
We got lots of hands-on with The Division recently, a game that has had fans excited for since its reveal in 2013. We also check out UFC 2 and take a look at two exciting Japanese games, Nier: Automata and Gravity Rush 2.

» 84 Reviews

This month we have our review for the long in-development game from the creator of Braid, The Witness. We also see how Mario & Luigi fares with a dash of Paper Mario thrown in and share our Darkest Dungeon and Resident Evil Zero HD survival stories.

» 96 Game Over

Think you know Star Wars? Take our quiz and see if you can match the quote to the correct speaker. Good luck!



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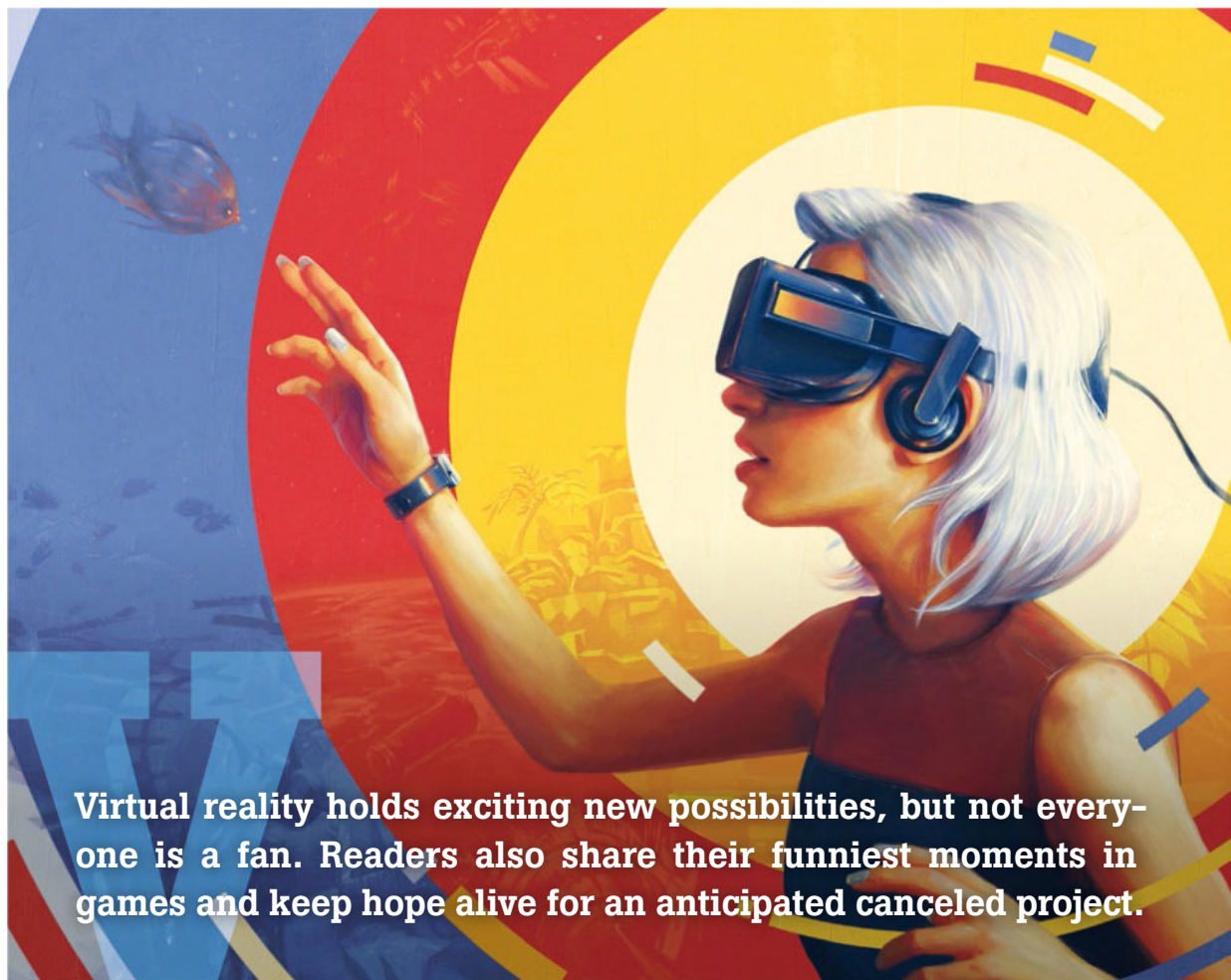
ENERGIZER ULTIMATE LITHIUM LASTS LONGER THAN
MONDAY MORNINGS
AND YOUR DRAMATIC QUITTING FANTASY
AND THE DAY YOU FINALLY WALKED AWAY
AND THE TERROR OF OPENING A SMALL BUSINESS
AND THE FIRST QUARTERLY PROFIT YOU REINVESTED
AND LOVING MONDAY MORNINGS BECAUSE YOU'RE FREE



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Virtual reality holds exciting new possibilities, but not everyone is a fan. Readers also share their funniest moments in games and keep hope alive for an anticipated canceled project.

A Whole New World

Issue 273 might be the best issue of *Game Informer* I've ever read. The cover story on VR is thoroughly researched and well explained. I never really took VR seriously until this issue, and I was pleasantly surprised to find out that it's not just a gimmicky and stupid-looking peripheral. You're taking VR seriously, so I will too. It must have taken an incredible amount of work to compose so much information on one subject and then make it interesting to read. I'll admit that I rolled my eyes when I first saw the cover, and almost didn't take the issue into the bathroom with me. But I did. So, thanks to everyone that contributes to this fine publication.

Brandon Lanterman
via email

We're glad we qualified as worthy bathroom-reading material... we guess. After countless failed attempts, technological advances and interest have finally made VR viable, which is why we felt an in-depth investigation of the technology was a worthy endeavor. However, not all readers agreed with us...

Virtual Insanity

I can't believe you dedicated 50 pages of the latest issue to VR tech. Seriously? We all get that a VR world would be neat, but the reality is that it's like every other gimmick in video game history and will be dead in no time flat. It costs as much as the consoles themselves and there will be no real support for it (maybe three or four games in the first two years). It's like the Kinect or PlayStation Eye or countless other add-ons that companies try to make people think they need. VR is dead before it gets out of the gate in my book. I get it is an emerging tech, but don't waste over half of the mag to sell us on something most of us don't want.

Keith Cleaver
via email

Please stop wasting paper and trees by writing about this stupid VR crap. Issue 273 was almost a complete waste. I feel ripped off, as now I have to wait another month for next issue. I'm hoping you guys leave VR out of next month's issue and actually report on games like I thought the magazine was supposed to do. VR or Oculus is not a game, last I knew. Hell, it doesn't even have to be for

games. It doesn't belong, and it's a stupid technology like the Kinect that is going to fail.

Eric Bahns
via email

Gee, we better contact Facebook immediately and let them know they wasted \$2 billion on a dead technology. Contrary to what our cantankerous armchair analysts suggest, VR is already doing pretty well – Oculus says pre-orders have been considerably better than expected, and that over 100 VR games will launch this year (slightly more than three or four). That said, we're not trying to "sell" anyone on VR; our piece raised numerous issues with the technology, and our staff still has its share of skeptics, which you can read more about on page 34.





What's In A Name?

As far as P.T./Silent Hills being canceled by Konami goes, why don't they change the names up and make the game with another publisher? It's not like no one is going to hire Kojima or want to publish that game; I'm sure the hype from it has made it even more valuable now too. Why are people acting like it's game over – am I missing something?

Mike Pike
via email

Silent Hill fans were understandably upset when Konami canceled Kojima's collaboration with director Guillermo Del Toro. While the duo could team up for a new horror-themed project, reusing the same assets or even the same concept could potentially land them in legal trouble with Konami. Given that Kojima has already signed on with Sony to create a new franchise, the outlook for P.T. living on under a different name seems doubtful. But fear not, Mike: Fans are already making their own spiritual successor to P.T. called Allison Road (shown above), which may pique your interest – provided Konami doesn't sue them, too.

Create-A-Character?

I won't quibble with Andrew Reiner's score for Fallout 4, but one criticism he leveled against the game warrants a retort. Reiner suggested that Fallout 4 was weakened by a rushed opening narrative, as we get to know little about the main character prior to being thrust into the Commonwealth. In a game like Fallout, this is not a viable criticism; the entire philosophy of such a game is to allow the player to fully create his or her character through the many choices they make. Too much pre-game narrative would influence the player's choices, thus violating this underlying philosophy. In short, the player is supposed to create his/her own story, not simply walk through a pre-determined narrative arc.

Jamie Phillips
via email

We'll overlook the part where you presume the authority to decide which of Reiner's personal experiences with the game are valid, and entertain your argument. If fully creating your own character is Fallout's philosophical underpinning, then why force the player into a parental role by giving them a spouse and child in the first place? Bethesda clearly had a specific, authored narrative in mind for Fallout 4's main quest line, but the opening was so abbreviated that Reiner simply didn't find it effective. You're free to ignore the main quest once you're out of the vault, but as far as openings go, Fallout 4 wasn't Bethesda's strongest.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Ever since the next-gen consoles came out, have you ever wished that they did not?"

No.

"Are play-testers being thorough enough?"

Sometimes.

"I have received your January 2016 issue around the 14th. Is this supposed to happen?"

Sure?

Best News Tip Of The Month:

"Have you ever wanted to experience life through the eyes of a painfully introverted college girl? Well, here's your chance."

Question Of The Month:

If video game characters could run for president, who would you vote for and why?

gi spy

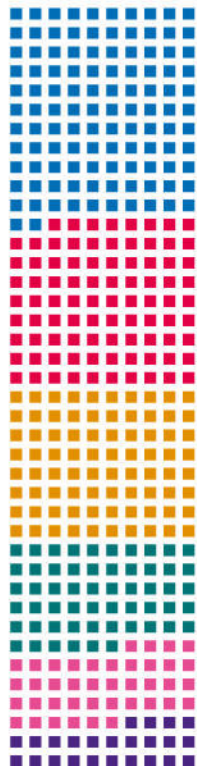


PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) The force is strong with the crew at TT Fusion.

(Right) Tim tried his best to ruin the premiere of *The Force Awakens* by showing up to the theater dressed as the Trade Federation's lamest Viceroy, Nute Gunray.

On Your Mind



- VR Fanfare
- VR F-U-fare
- Gaming's Greatest Yuks
- Review Score Gripes
- Indie Love
- "DLC Is Ruining Gaming!"



Laugh It Up

In issue 273, we asked readers to share the funniest moment they've witnessed in a game. The responses gave us clear insight into the maturity level of our readers.

The funniest moment was in MGS 4 when Old Snake meets Johnny Sasaki for the first time. The way Kojima carried out that scene with Snake walking in on Johnny having irritable bowel syndrome in an oil barrel was flawless.

Michael Reeves

Once I was playing as Donkey Kong in Smash Bros. Melee, and I paused to grab a snack just as my best friend knocked me down. When I looked back at the screen, Donkey Kong was lying spread-eagle on his back, eyes closed, mouth agape...with the little pink beam sword item sticking straight up out of his crotch. We both utterly lost it and laughed so hard that we were crying and out of breath. It still makes me laugh to this day.

Lee Taggart

I think the most hilarious moment was Mordin singing "I am the very model of a scientist salarian" in Mass Effect 2. I've never laughed out loud as hard as I did when I heard Mordin singing for the first time. His follow-up number in Mass Effect 3 was also fantastic.

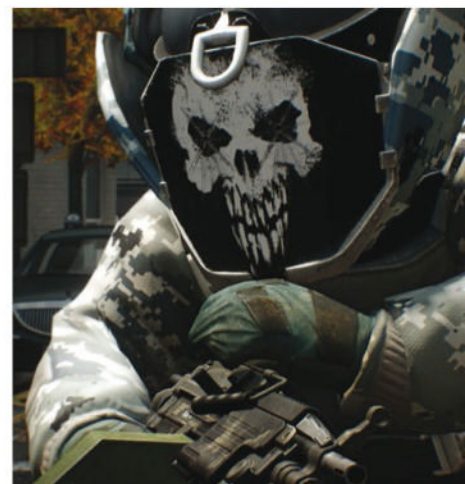
EJ Micielica

Get A Grip

I was just reading issue 273, and I didn't get far before I saw something truly disturbing. In the Ugly section of the G.B.U., people are understandably upset that Payday 2 has added micro transactions after the developers said they wouldn't. But players are issuing death threats to the game's moderators on Steam (i.e., other gamers)?! Come on people – threatening to kill someone? That is another human being; someone's child, sibling, or even parent. If just a few of us act like this then it makes us all look like uncivilized violent brats. We as gamers can never be taken seriously if we react so poorly to what is ultimately an insignificant little thing. If you truly want to show your disgust in their business practice, then simply don't play the game.

Corey Christian
via email

Well said, Corey. People who threaten developers and other players with violence – as well as those who make excuses for such bad behavior – have no place in the gaming community. If everyone in gaming shared your common-sense perspective, we'd all have a lot less drama and a lot more fun.



(Left) Shea guilted comic book author Brian Michael Bendis into taking this picture by invoking the "Brian Code."

(Right) Final Fantasy XV director Hajime Tabata (third from right) stopped by with some fellow Square Enix folk to see the vault and discuss his career. Read the interview on page 30.



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1



WINNER

1 Ricky Victome

We're used to Pikachu being adorable, but Blanka (chest hair and all) deserves just as big of an "Awwwww!"

2 Elizabeth Blackburn

Aerith always has a smile on her face. We're sure she has a promising future ahead of her.

3 Sam Biloff

No shoes. No shirt. No star magic.

4 Linnette Rodriquez

Not only is Laura terrifying, she loves photo bombing her prey.



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(Left) Readers Matt and Natasha Phillips win the award for Best Christmas Tree Ever, thanks to their newly stoked love for Fallout.

(Right) Andy made a trip to Frisco, Texas this month to catch up with Randy Pitchford and check out Gearbox's new studio





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The Rising Level Of Competition

With Activision Blizzard acquiring the MLG, the landscape of competitive gaming is undergoing a sea change

by Matthew Kato

Industry analyst firm SuperData estimates that the eSports industry generates \$748 million in revenue around the world, with the expectation that it'll increase to \$1.9 billion by 2018. With this kind of outlook, it's no wonder companies are starting to look into getting a piece of the competitive gaming action. ESPN has started its own eSports website, Sony has a PlayStation Plus eSports league, and Electronic Arts created its own competitive gaming division to manage its titles with eSports capabilities. But perhaps the biggest move came from the company with the most to gain in the space. Activision Blizzard – with series like Call of Duty, StarCraft, and Heroes of the Storm – is hoping to become a big player in eSports through its acquisition of Major League Gaming (MLG). With the titles, the resources, and now the infrastructure, Activision Blizzard could help spur eSports to the next level.

SuperData CEO Joost van Dreunen doesn't think the purchase will pay off immediately for Activision Blizzard, but believes in the long-term, foundational value to Activision. "One of the great bottlenecks in the ecosystem is owning the infrastructure, the ability to organize, host, and digitally broadcast tournaments," van Dreunen says. "Think of it as a music label having acquired a company that specializes in setting up music events and concerts."

Mike Sepso, MLG co-founder and now senior vice president at Activision Blizzard Media Networks (ABMN), says by acquiring the MLG, Activision Blizzard gains personnel with experience in eSports, the MLG.tv streaming platform, backend tournament and online competition technology, and the name recognition of the MLG brand.

Activision Blizzard wants to utilize the MLG brand and take eSports to the next level. "We have a big audience, but there's no value being derived from it," says Sepso, who points out that worldwide eSports has fans as big as your average sport, but is getting only 10-percent of the revenue per fan as compared to a traditional sport's fanbase. Instead of raising money by going after eSports fans themselves through tournament fees,

merchandise, etc., Sepso wants to generate revenue from advertisers. Companies want to get their products in front of the eSports audience – which is valued because the viewers are typically young and have disposable income. From there he says, money can be put back into eSports to make it bigger and better. Furthermore, with one of Activision Blizzard's major shareholders being Chinese company Tencent – who already owns League of Legends' Riot Games – the MLG could be a part of Activision Blizzard's plans in the massive Chinese market.

MLG, which will retain its name, gets to survive and grow through the acquisition with Activision Blizzard's backing. Last year the league was in talks with multiple suitors, but a deal didn't materialize. The Activision Blizzard deal was for a rumored \$46 million (terms of the deal were not officially disclosed), not an exorbitant amount. Van Dreunen says the price tag "wasn't because MLG was raking in the money," and former player Stephen Ellis writing for *eSports Observer* characterized the situation at MLG as a "fire sale of MLG's assets." With Activision Blizzard's backing, however, MLG should be strengthened by an influx of cash.



Sepso says despite the acquisition ABMN is not planning any changes in MLG's current relationships with non-Activision Blizzard products, and on the flip side, Blizzard games won't exclusively deal with the MLG. The MLG currently works with companies like Valve (Counter-Strike: Global Offensive), Nintendo (Super Smash Bros.), Microsoft (Halo 5), Riot Games (League of Legends), and more, while Blizzard is partnering with the Electronic Sports League (ESL) to support the North American leg of Heroes of the Storm Global Championship Circuit in 2016. Ironically, the MLG received a blow in the fall of last year when Activision announced it chose the ESL for the upcoming Call of Duty World League after partnering with the MLG previously.

Van Dreunen believes ABMN when it says they won't have the MLG serve only Activision games in the future. "There is no incentive for them to go against Valve," he says. "Remember that just like the market for traditional sports, where football fans will also watch basketball games, gamer audiences like many different types of games. So using this relatively small acquisition as a resource to spite Valve or its fans seems inconsistent with the usual

strategic grandeur of Bobby Kotick."

As friendly as this all sounds, in the future there inevitably must be some move to bring tournaments in-house into the MLG instead of relying on a third-party to promote their product. If ABMN's partnership bolsters the infrastructure, quality, reach, and newly developed business models of the MLG, it only stands to reason that ABMN would bring those assets to bear on behalf of games like Call of Duty.

Sepso talks of ABMN's plans being the kind that benefit any game at MLG and possibly by extension all of eSports. He characterizes the period eSports is in right now as that of a major sport that hasn't had the benefit of decades of experience to work out the kinks yet. Sepso says he wants to see uniformity in how players are managed by teams and how teams are structured into leagues, as well as the growth of streaming platforms so they can handle what one day he hopes will be NFL-caliber, premier monetized content.

As these grand plans take place, your normal eSports player or viewer won't experience much of a difference for the time being. "Overall, I don't think it's too much of an impact on the player itself," says Jeffrey "iakona" Dolan,

a member of Heroes of the Storm eSports team COGNITIVE Gaming. Dolan says that while the general production level of a tournament might improve, he thinks there is a baseline – in terms of playing and getting paid, for example – that is already in place for eSports.

Dolan says he'd like to see small changes across the board, like quicker payouts and less latency on streaming platforms (so players could converse better with their audience in real time). The bigger prize – respect and recognition – could bring personal sponsorships and other benefits to the players. "I think that it is kind of due for the next big, major shift that will bump eSports up to the next level and make it a lot more mainstream," he says. "I feel like it can rival football, baseball, or basketball. It could basically become something like that – a household name – down the road."

If there's possibly a negative effect to the growth of competitive gaming, it could be companies jumping on the bandwagon and saturating the market with inferior eSports product. "Yeah, I'm actually worried about something like that happening since it happened in the past," says Dolan, pointing out Electronic Arts' failed Dawngate MOBA. At the moment the money is concentrated in a few games, and Dolan believes those games need to grow first until a larger pool of new ones can be supported successfully in three to five years.

Whether eSports is ready for it or not, the mainstream is already calling. Three-time NBA champion and ex-player Rick Fox has bought a League of Legends team. Dallas Mavericks owner and *Shark Tank* entrepreneur Mark Cuban is eyeing investment in the sport as well. At the Intel Extreme Masters event last year, he said, "This is a real sport, and people are going to figure it out really, really quick." In April 2014, Amazon bought popular streaming site Twitch for close to a billion dollars. Recently ESPN started up an eSports channel for its website, and has partnered with the MLG in the past to broadcast eSports content. These are not unrelated events, and Activision Blizzard and the MLG want to be a part of the groundswell as it continues to build. \





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Oculus Announces \$599 Rift Price at CES

Initial Pre-Orders Sell Out For VR Device Coming In March



by Matthew Kato

Oculus' vision of virtual reality has grabbed the imagination of gamers and is also starting to seep out into the general public. While we're all excited about the kinds of new experiences that will flash before our eyes and fill our minds once we put the headset on, the big question has always been: How much will it cost? At CES in January, Oculus finally announced the price of the Rift retail kit – \$599. Many had sticker shock, but it's not a debilitating blow for VR or the unit.

Regardless of the price, pre-orders for the first batch of the retail unit sold out within a half-hour after the announcement. Oculus isn't saying how many units are contained in this initial wave of headsets, which will start shipping on March 28, but the company assured gamers that even if you're not in this batch, they won't run out of Rifts. Instead, placing a pre-order now simply means you'll get yours in a later shipment (at the time of this writing, the company's website listed a June ship date for new orders).

The VR headset will also be sold in a limited number at undisclosed brick-and-mortar stores in April, and is shipping to 20 countries total. Those who pledged money for a development kit during the Rift's original Kickstarter campaign will get a free Kickstarter Edition of the unit. On the software end, Oculus says the headset will be supported by 100 games by the end of this year, including 20 exclusives.

The \$599 price tag was more than some expected – Oculus founder Palmer Luckey apologized if people were taken aback by the price, saying that the company mismanaged the message. Palmer said in a September 2015 interview with Road to VR that the unit

would cost "roughly in that [\$350] ballpark... but it's going to cost more than that."

That price tag gets you the headset, an Xbox One controller, the Rift tracking sensor, a Rift remote for navigating, and games EVE: Valkyrie and Lucky's Tale. The Rift does not currently come with Oculus' custom Rift Touch motion-input controllers, but if you pre-order the unit now, a spot will be reserved for you in the Touch pre-order line. No price for the Touch has been announced, but it is expected to come out in the second half of this year.

Industry analysts and financial investment firm Baird Equity Research believes that the Rift will target zealous early adopters over the general public, for now. "We expect the installed base of high-end VR platform to ramp gradually and not penetrate the mass market likely until 2017-18 as price-points fall below \$400," reads their investors note. Baird believes that expecting multi-million unit sales in 2016 is optimistic unless a price drop occurs before the holiday season. Baird thinks that due to the current price of the Rift, the mobile VR market – like Google Cardboard and Gear VR – will "gain faster momentum" among consumers.

Valve and HTC's Vive headset lies on the opposite end of the usability spectrum from mobile VR offerings, with a suggested space requirement of 25 square meters. The Vive was at CES, boasting an updated headset with a front-facing camera (allowing you to see what's in the physical world while still wearing the headset), an improved design of its controllers, and better visuals.

HTC is positioning the Vive as a premium product, and it will likely be the most expensive of the upcoming VR units. The price of Sony's PlayStation VR headset, on the other hand, should be closer to the Rift's

Hardware Intensive

Oculus is taking pre-orders for a Rift/PC bundle for \$1,499 starting this month as well as partnering with Dell, Asus, and Alienware for PCs that are "designed, assembled, and tested with Rift in mind," according to Oculus. These PCs – minus the Rift – start at \$999. Oculus suggests the following recommended PC specs for the Rift, which are not unsubstantial.

- **Graphics Card:** NVIDIA GTX 970 / AMD R9 290 equivalent or greater
- **Processor:** Intel i5-4590 equivalent or greater
- **Memory:** 8GB+ RAM
- **Output:** Compatible HDMI 1.3 video output
- **Input:** Three USB 3.0 ports plus one USB 2.0 port
- **Operating System:** Windows 7 SP1 (64-bit) or newer

neighborhood if not cheaper. Despite the spotlight of CES and a 2016 release, Sony did not announce a release date or price for its PlayStation VR headset, which the company has said should cost as much as a home console. Whether that's referring to the PS3's \$600 launch price or the \$400 price of the PS4 remains to be seen, but it could make all the difference in the world.

For more on VR and its upcoming games and products, please read our VR cover story in issue #273. \

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Insomniac Sings A Song Of The Deep

Many of Insomniac's best known games are big console exclusives like Ratchet & Clank and Sunset Overdrive. The veteran development studio's newest project is cut from a different cloth. **Song of the Deep** feels like a traditional independent project and continues to evolve the team's already impressive design elasticity.

by Matt Miller

Song of the Deep draws on the exploration and gear-gating dynamic that first appeared in games like Metroid and Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, but environment, story, and art set it apart both from those classics and other recent genre success stories like Axiom Verge and Ori and the Blind Forest. Players control 12-year old Merryn, a girl from the idyllic western Irish seaside of County Clare. When her fisherman father disappears beneath the waves near their cliffside home, Merryn builds a submarine and ventures into the sea, only to discover all the mystical stories of monsters and mermaids she heard from her father are true.

From the lilting Irish narrator (Merryn relating her adventure as an adult), to the soulful melodies that accompany Merryn's undersea adventure, Song of the Deep goes out of its way to emphasize its fantasy storybook qualities. Ten areas await discovery, from a lost city filled with dangerous automatons to the ruins left behind by a lost race of merrow. Shipwrecks litter the seafloor. Ancient statues await reassembly. Titanic sea monsters lurk in shadowy caves. The world is mysterious and the underwater game zones

are varied and appropriately fantastical. Gameplay sequences combine shooting and combat with a healthy dose of puzzle solving, all while the maneuverable submarine slips into hidden crags and dives ever deeper into the seabed.

Like the games that inspired it, Song of the Deep embraces the idea of new powers that slowly unlock access to an ever-broadening game world. Progression is split between core abilities discovered through exploration and additional upgrades unlocked by trading currency to hungry hermit crabs, which in turn improve your submarine's capabilities. A metallic claw lets you fling objects at enemies, pull chain rings to open gates, and grab up lights that might scare off photophobic creatures. Merryn gathers tyne energy, a rechargeable mystical energy source, that allows her to blast enemies with torpedo-like projectiles. Sonar uncovers hidden areas, but also expands outward to blast enemies away.

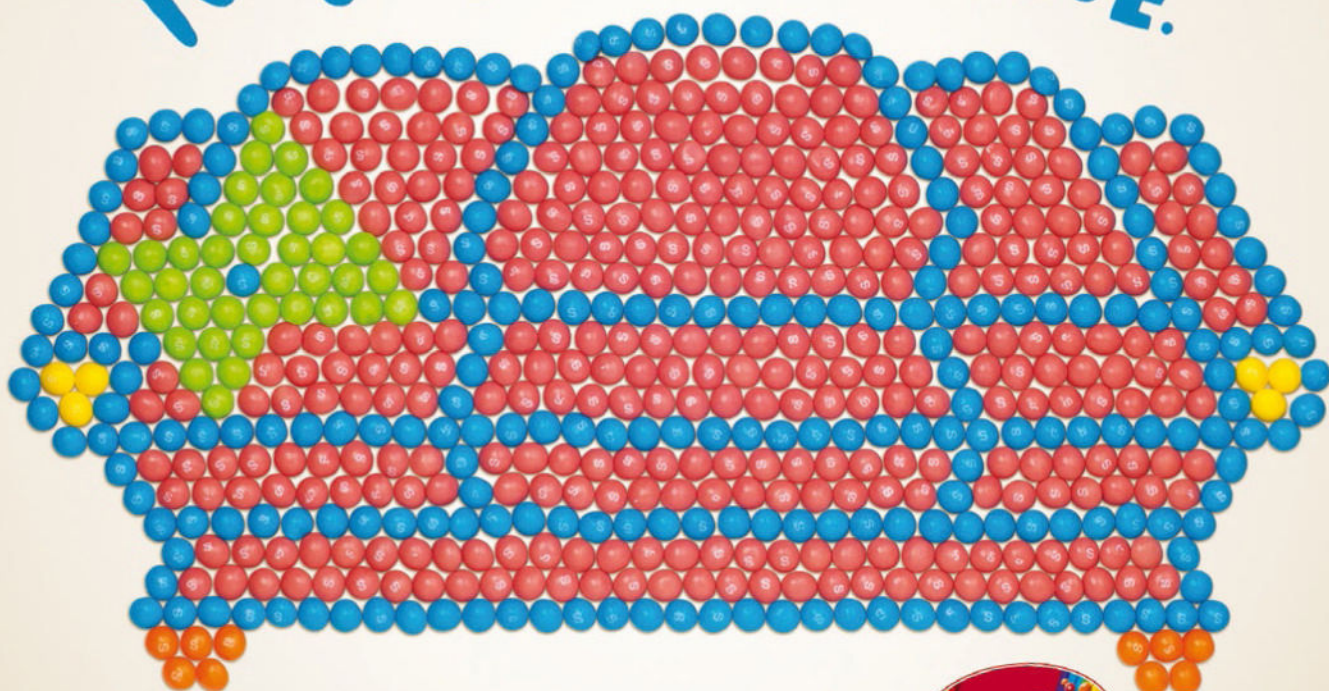
As players discover the gaelic-themed undersea world, Merryn's character development weaves into the narrative. Her face is always visible in a porthole view in the lower left of the screen, and thought bubbles

rise from her portrait to express her feelings. At times, the view zooms close as Merryn slips out of her submarine and explores her surroundings without the steely protection of her vessel to ward off attacks, calling to mind classic adventures like Blaster Master.

Insomniac is maintaining creative control over its new exploration game, but the studio is pursuing a distribution partnership with GameStop to bring the game to market. In addition to online avenues of purchase on PlayStation Network, Xbox Live, and Steam, Song of the Deep will also be available as a physical release at GameStop. We'll learn soon enough whether the partnership helps bring visibility to Insomniac's unique title, while simultaneously offering a compelling exclusive to the retailer when Song of the Deep hits later this spring. ♦

Disclaimer: GameStop is the parent company of Game Informer. We were contacted directly by representatives of Insomniac regarding potential coverage of Song of the Deep. All opinions in this article are those of the author, based upon interviews and pre-release footage provided by Insomniac

Make a **SKITTLES**
COUCH. THEN HAVE YOUR
tongue search ^F_R **LOOSE**
CHANGE.



CREATE THE RAINBOW.
TASTE THE RAINBOW.®



The Blind Man Who Beat Ocarina Of Time

Name:

Terry Garrett

YouTube:

MegaTgarrett

Career:

Software Engineer

Location:

Colorado

After five years of posting videos, Terry Garrett finally triumphed over Ganon, completing his playthrough of Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time despite his disability. Using two stereo speakers positioned at arm's length and an emulator that allows for save states, he persevered through the adventure. We caught up with Garrett to learn more about his achievement.

interview by Brian Shea

Have you been blind since birth?

I actually had limited sight from birth to like age 10, so I know my colors. My first video game systems were the NES and Sega Genesis, so like old Mario games and the Sonic the Hedgehog games – I know what those look like. I basically just got a bad set of eyes. I had to have several surgeries to keep the little bit of sight I had left. By age five I lost my left eye and by age ten I lost my right eye due to scar tissue.

What was the transition like for playing games after you lost your sight?

I had friends who played games and I would ask questions and ask them to let me play along to the best of my ability. I had another student at the deaf and blind school I went to who also liked video games and we would just kind of hand-jam the controls to try to make stuff happen and just have fun with that, but I wanted to do more. I wanted go back to the classics that I used to see and figure out what to do.

Is there any reason you chose Ocarina of Time?

When I still had a little bit of sight, I loved the original Zelda game. I loved the music and gameplay, but I never was able to pass it. Unfortunately it doesn't have enough accessibility for me to go back and try it now. So that just kindled the fire for my love of

Zelda games, and then I watched my friends play Ocarina of Time several times and listened to it.

How did you learn to navigate a 3D world?

There's one game developed specifically for the blind called Shades of Doom which you're basically lost in a scientific lab and have to navigate through corridors to find weapons and shoot enemies, but you're orientating yourself in this 3D environment. I think that I was able to use those skills when I go through the 3D world in Zelda. It allowed me to orient myself better when I heard certain sounds.

Were there times you were worried it just wouldn't be possible?

There was one particular time in the Water Temple that was the hardest. I actually had to reach out to my fans to learn how to do it. It's just after getting the longshot, you have to drop down and float down a river with whirlpools and at the end you have to longshot out of the river and shoot an arrow at an eye. I asked the fans and I got a lot of help.

What are your favorite series to play for fun?

Unfortunately with newer games getting more and more advanced, the accessibility actually gets worse.

I really like the Oddworld series. I like to – if I can't play them myself – at least listen to others play the Mario games. Of course the new Zelda games – I watched my friend play all the way through Twilight Princess and I so wish I could play that game.

What's so different about Twilight Princess in terms of accessibility?

There are certain challenges in Twilight Princess that would be really hard. In the very beginning, you have to herd goats into a barn. That would be really hard for me.

Now that you're finished with this Ocarina of Time playthrough, are you plotting your next videos?

When I finished Ocarina of Time, I just wanted to get it finished. I didn't expect the response I was going to get. I feel like I have to carry on. The two major games that shoot out at me from the comments are Majora's Mask and Dark Souls. I have to use save states, and sighted people complain about the saving aspect of Dark Souls, so I might do a one-off video where I play it and discover what I can do for a little bit. I think next on the list is Majora's Mask because it's another layer of difficulty. I also haven't played through that game or heard anyone else play it either, so it's a totally new adventure for me. \

The Good



HOME consoles are far from dead. According to the latest NPD sales numbers for the holiday season, the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One are beating the pace set by their predecessors by 47 percent. On the software side, December 2015 was the best sales month this generation, and the number-one selling game for 2015 was Call of Duty: Black Ops III – which came out in the beginning of November.

ROCKSTAR

North leader Leslie Benzie has left the Grand Theft Auto studio after 17 years with the company. Benzie produced Grand Theft Auto III, was instrumental in the company through Red Dead Redemption and GTA V, and was inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences hall of fame along with Rockstar founders Dan and Sam Houser in 2014. Benzie left the company after being on an extended sabbatical.



The Bad

g-b-u-

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"Message to Xbox One or Microsoft or whoever the f---. Y'all f---ing servers f---ing whack, man. Y'all going to make me switch to PlayStation if y'all don't hurry up and get this s--- fixed. Is it that difficult to play somebody online? What the f--- is you doing Bill Gates? Fix your s---, man!"



– **Snoop Dogg** voices his frustration via Instagram

The Ugly



SHENMUE III'S crowdfunding saga takes another turn for the ugly. Developer Ys Net polled its Kickstarter community to determine if late-to-the-game PayPal backers should get the same rewards for giving money to the project. The majority (over 40 percent) voted that either choice was fine with them – a polling option which in and of itself is a useless designation – and the second-highest voting block said they wanted to make the Kickstarter rewards available on PayPal. Regardless, Ys Net decided to make the rewards exclusive. This angered those who voted for the measure, and as some pointed out, could potentially prevent people on PayPal from giving needed money to the project. Furthermore, it's been discovered that the voting method itself wasn't secure, allowing for non-backers to vote. 💎

Merchants

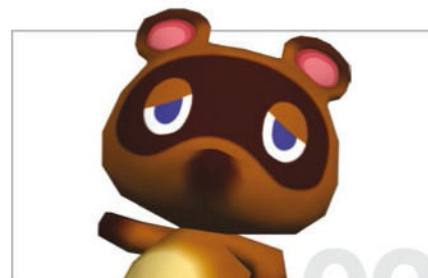
by Kyle Hilliard



Merchant

Resident Evil 4

The hooded merchant of Resident Evil 4 continues to be among the game's biggest mysteries even a decade after release. How he gets his stock or why he helps Leon is unknown, but his gravelly voice sticks in the head of everyone who has ever spent time with Resident Evil 4.



Tom Nook

Animal Crossing

The recurring Tom Nook owns your Animal Crossing soul (until you pay it off) and runs the local shop. In a game all about collecting a trading stuff, Nook is a consistent presence and someone you get to know well.



Ravio

The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

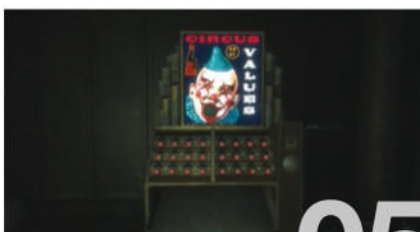
Ravio takes over your house, doesn't pay rent, and sells you the stuff a roommate should loan to you for free. He has an undeniable charm, though, and plays a surprisingly important role in A Link Between Worlds' plot.



Phil Cassidy

Grand Theft Auto

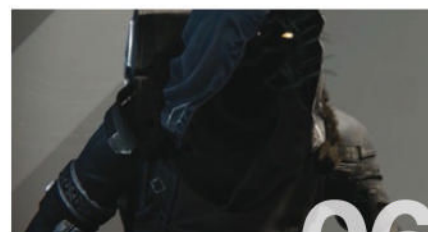
Cassidy may never have served in the military, but he is the go-to heavy arms dealer who also makes homemade "boomshine" so volatile, he accidentally blew off his arm with it. He's not in every GTA, but is a memorable personality whenever he appears.



The Circus Of Values

BioShock

Reading the words "Circus of Values" instantly plays the vending machine's familiar vocalization (provided by director Ken Levine) in the head of every BioShock player. It is the most charismatic vending machine ever created.



Xûr

Destiny

Destiny's Xûr sells exotic items – but he has a day job. He only appears on weekends, making his stock particularly desirable. His items come and go in a matter of hours, making him a destination for weekend warriors.



Rusty

Rusty's Real Deal Baseball

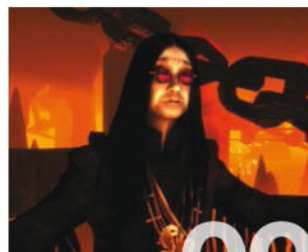
Rusty is a sad old dog with more puppies than he can handle who runs a shop selling baseball minigames. Hagglng his real dollar prices down always leads to humorous dialogue about his family and donut obsession.



Tem Shop

Undertale

The Tem shop is notable in Undertale as the only store in the game willing to buy items from you, which is odd considering its clerk is saving for college. They get very excited about even the most mundane transactions.



The Guardian Of Metal

Brütal Legend

Inspired by, modeled after, and performed by Ozzy Osbourne, The Guardian of Metal is the keeper of timeless secrets who doesn't engage directly in demon combat. Instead he provides vehicle upgrades – if you can prove yourself.



Drebin

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

Drebin is notable in the Metal Gear universe as being the only person in the series willing to give Snake exactly what he needs when he needs it. No secrets. No hidden agendas. Just a pet monkey and instant access to any gun. 🐒

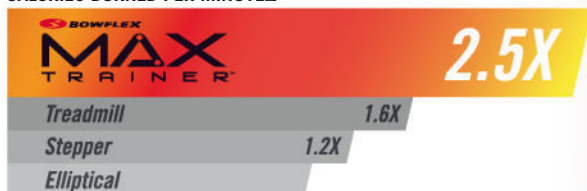


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The Fascinating World Of League Of Legends

We break down what makes the game interesting as a spectator, highlight what you should pay attention to, and celebrate the best eSports athletes currently playing

by Daniel Tack

genre on the PC scene in recent years has catapulted competitive video games into massive spectator sports capable of taking over traditional sports arenas.

Riot Games' League of Legends is arguably the frontrunner of the movement, with sports-style leagues, giant prize pools, and tremendous viewer participation and engagement that extends to the creation of fantasy leagues like the NFL. With League of Legends selling out venues like the Staples Center and commanding prize pools in the millions, it begs the question – if you're not already into eSports, League of Legends, or other similar genre offerings, why should you care?

While eSports have been around in various forms since the inception of video games and competition, the rise of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)



2015 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

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11013	MI	134	01112
01115	MI	134	01112

I Don't Play League, So Why Should I Watch?

Even if the prospect of diving into League of Legends or other competitive games is daunting, it's possible to enjoy the spectacle and sport of it without ever touching a mouse. A rousing competitive League match is on par with any major sporting event, infused with energy, personality, and power plays.

No two League of Legends games are alike, and each has a ton of interesting moments for viewers to enjoy – from exciting character bans and metagame shifts to “big plays” where a team breaks away with a game-changing team-kill.

Viewership continues to steadily rise, which is why major media organizations like ESPN are getting into the space.

Can You Break Down The Basics?

The concept of League of Legends is simple, but the interactions and complexity that occur during a match as it evolves are where the magic happens. At the core, it's a game of two teams of five players seeking to break into the opposing base and destroy it. Before a match, players choose their champion from a roster of more than 100 characters. Each has unique skills, opening up a lot of strategic depth for team composition. Players are assisted by A.I. minions that constantly push the defensive towers within three lanes that lead to the base. Players collect experience and gold and grow in power, obtaining new abilities and items as they slay minions and players on the other team.

Each player has a specialized role

that he or she takes on during a game, much like a quarterback or a point guard in traditional sports. For instance, an AD (Attack Damage) carry (because they “carry” the team in the late game if given room to develop) will often look for protection in the early game from a support character as they grow. After they level up and obtain some items, they become capable of dishing out massive punishment. A jungler may opt to stay out of the lanes entirely, taking on non-player foes in the jungle sections of the map for gold and experience – allowing the rest of the team to get better experience from the lanes, since they won't be sharing. These characters are also often looking for opportunities to dive

into the lanes when skirmishes occur, turning the tide with superior numbers and picking up kills. Other players often take up more set positions in the three lanes during the early game and eventually come together in the middle and late game, but there are always exceptions to traditional play. That's where exciting ambushes and other strategies make the game dynamic and interesting game after game.

What Should I Pay Attention To During A Match?

Watching players carefully put together their ultimate team compositions during the drafting and ban phase can be even more exciting than the game itself, especially when you watch a player's favorite champion get banned or watch some of the crazy picks come out of the woodwork. When one of your favorite players snags a completely unexpected champion, that's when you know it's going to be a wild ride.

The teams often feign at each other in the early game, leading up to the game-defining “big plays” that leave entire teams destroyed and bases broken. But this isn't always the case, and that's part of the fun. Games are often wildly different depending on the teams playing and champions being used, so they can turn into aggressive bloodbaths or calculated cat-and-mouse waiting games.

However the match gets there, inevitably the action turns to the 5v5 team fights. This is when both teams bring it all to the table in epic, game-defining battles. Watching all the champion abilities sync up and execute at the professional level is an awesome sight to behold, as five players work together in tandem to pull off



The League of Legends World Championship

TEAMS TO WATCH

While players are traded and move around in traditional sports, the eSports world is often much faster paced with its shifts. Entire teams can be formed and dissolved in a year's time, and players are constantly finding new homes where their skills as carries, mids, and supports can be best used for the all-important five-person stack. Win a major tournament? You could be somewhere else just a few weeks later. Lose one? Your entire team could be on the bench. It's crazy out there. That said, some teams have found some consistency performing at the highest level.

Origen (EU LCS) – 2015 worlds semifinalists. Team owner xPeke actually benched himself to add a better player to the team roster.

Flash Wolves (LMS) – This Taiwanese team has a wealth of talent in its youthful roster. Be sure to check out 18-year-old Maple in action, widely considered to be the best Taiwanese mid-player.

TSM (NA LCS) – A classic North American favorite, TSM is looking great with the acquisition of Doublelift from CLG.

SKTelecom T1 (LCK) – The reigning World Champions boast one of the best players in the world, Faker, and are the ones to watch going into the next year.

Cloud9 (NA LCS) – If you're looking for in-your-face play and team compositions that break the mold, Cloud9 is the one to watch. If you're a viewer, that combination makes for an amazing spectacle and exciting moments.

THE LEGENDS OF LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Whether it's on a daily stream watching one of these guys "knock around a few balls" or during a major competitive event, these players are masters of their craft. Keep an eye on them if you want to see the world's best in action.



APHROMOO

Full Name: Zaqueri Black
Team: Counter Logic Gaming (CLG)
Age: 23
Nation: United States
Position: Support

Achievements

- 2015 All-Star
- 2015 NA LCS Champion
- 2014 NA Spring Split champion
- 2015 Summer split All-Pro team

Quick Facts

- Aphromoo started his career in 2011 as an AD Carry and gained an enormous following as a streamer. In 2012, he switched to playing the Support role and joined CLG.
- He and Doublelift were widely considered to be the strongest duo lane in North America. Doublelift once referred to their partnership as "Rush Hour."
- Aphromoo leads all active NA LCS players in NA LCS Regular Season Assists with 1,126.



DOUBLELIFT

Name: Yiliang Peng
Team: Team SoloMid (TSM)
Age: 22
Nation: United States
Position: AD Carry

Achievements

- Two-time All-Star
- 2015 NA LCS Championship participant

Quick Facts

- Doublelift was the face of CLG until the 2015 offseason when, after four years with the team, he switched to NALCS rival Team SoloMid (TSM).
- Doublelift is an extremely outspoken member of the player community and has openly discussed his opinions about his own skills and opposing players in the past.
- He is the all-time NA LCS regular season leader in kills with 724.



FAKER

Name: Lee Sang-hyeok
Team: SK Telecom T1
Age: 19
Nation: South Korea
Position: Mid

Achievements

- 2013 and 2015 World Champion; one of only three people to win two World Championships
- Two-time All-Star
- 2015 LCK Summer Finals MVP
- 2015 Korean Esports Player of the Year, Best League of Legends Player, and Most Popular player

Quick Facts

- Widely considered to be the best League of Legends player in the world.
- Faker is known for his aggressive game style and incredibly deep pool of champions – in 2015, Faker played with more than 20 different champions, and won more than 50 percent of his matches with all but 3 of those champions.

perfect timing and precision. Interestingly enough, watching the big-ticket games and how players handle the wide variety of situations thrown at them is one of the best ways to start learning League of Legends if you are interested in playing.

"League is a very difficult game to learn; I don't want to sugarcoat that," says League of Legends design director Greg Street. "We are very protective of the core League audience, and while we'd love to make the game easier to learn, we aren't willing to sacrifice the depth available to League players in the name of accessibility. Likewise, League requires a time commitment. You don't need to play games every single day, but you will eventually need to play a lot of games if you want to understand why players stick with it."

Where Can I Watch These Tournaments?

You can watch major events happening in League of Legends almost all year round on lolesports.com, Twitch, YouTube, and even at huge live venues. Past world championships have taken place at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, Sangam Stadium in Seoul, and the Mercedes-Benz Arena in Berlin.

The road to the 2016 championships is a long one, with regional tournaments in North America, Europe, and Asia. You can catch season games going on all year as teams accumulate points and prepare for the big show. The dates change from year to year, but you can safely expect the World Championship festivities to begin sometime in the fall, as they have in previous years. 💎



Teams of five display amazing skill and synergy



photo: Crystal Liepa

Final Fantasy's New Party Leader

The name wasn't the only thing that changed when Final Fantasy Versus XIII became Final Fantasy XV. **Hajime Tabata** also took over as the new director, bringing a level of transparency to the development process unlike any previous Final Fantasy title. We spoke to Tabata about his influences, how he balances expectations, and the value of communicating with the fans.

How did you get into game development?

When I was coming out of college and looking for my first job, I wanted to work for a company that dealt with something that I was accustomed to as a college student. The gaming

industry just happened to be the first job I got accepted for! It's a little embarrassing, but it's true.

I was living alone at the time, and I had the Super Nintendo in my room. I had The Legend of Zelda in the console plugged in, and I was looking at

it and thought "It would be great if I could create games." Or – at that time I was eating noodles every day since I was a student – I also had a thought about creating something better that I could eat. Otherwise, I love documentaries and I used to

watch them a lot, and the Japanese broadcast station NHK does a lot of that style of programming, so I wanted to look into working for them. So, it was basically things in my room at the time that gave me inspiration. Game development is the first one that came through.

It's not just as simple as "The Legend of Zelda was in my console." There is more history to where the notion came from...but it's a fun excuse.

What games can you single out as being influential for you?

As a consumer, the ones I was influenced the most by were simulation games, like the ones Koei was creating. But as a developer the most influential was Civilization. I liked simulations already, and Civilization really hit me in the core. Also, Ocarina of Time – I was really impressed by the open environment of that game. That was the first time I was experiencing a virtual world, by heart and even physically. The kind of personal experience I got playing that game connects to the kind of experience we want to build with Final Fantasy XV.

Square Enix has reorganized its internal development structure in the last few years. How different is the process, and how does it change your approach?

We're not limited to being a development team within a larger structure. Business Division 2, which I head, is a team that was built around creating Final Fantasy XV – not just limited to working with in-house development teams, but also working with international partners and collaborations. It's an all-encompassing studio that allows us to make our own decisions in order to make a project a success. We have our producers, our managers, the development team – all these different functionalities that encompass a studio.

Often, a development team within a larger organization will dismantle when they finish creating a game. Since we're functioning as an independent studio, we're now able to look at the medium- and long-term goals within the team...Similar to independent studios like Naughty Dog, we're able to be a continuously functioning studio.

You directed Crisis Core, which expanded a lot on the universe of Final Fantasy VII. With Final Fantasy VII Remake in the works, have you been consulted by that team about integrating those ideas into the new vision for that universe?

This follows from my answer about the development structure, because BD 2 functions as an independent studio, like all of the other BDs. So, I honestly don't know much about what's going on with the Final Fantasy VII discussions, and the other BDs don't know much about XV.

This is your first time directing a numbered Final Fantasy. What kind of advice did you get from other directors who had handled the main entries?

It wasn't necessarily from past directors, but the biggest thing that gave me strength was getting the support of the team members and their push to let me do things as I pleased. A lot of people who worked on past titles – our "veteran" staff – advised that boldly following my vision is what would be best for this title. That kind of push is what enabled me to what I'm doing.

Producers and directors of games tend to get most of the attention. Is there anyone who works on Final Fantasy that doesn't get the credit they deserve?

It's not one person in particular, but in terms of the position on the team, there is one that is as important as the director and producer. We call them project managers in our structure; they handle everything from managing the budget to negotiating with external partners to dealing with internal matters. The reason that the director is able to focus on the development and the producer on the business side of things is because the project managers are there, but because it is essentially more of a support role, they don't get the spotlight we believe they should get. I'm always wondering if there's a way to get them more attention.

When Final Fantasy XV was still called Final Fantasy Versus XIII, fans rarely heard anything about its development. When you took over, you made an effort to be more communicative about its progress. How do you think that approach has been working?

In relation to our core fans, I believe there has been some level of results that have come about from that endeavor. The direct approach isn't necessarily promotion...it's more about visibility. It wasn't about major information updates. Leading up to this point, we believed that we needed to create an environment where our consumers could be vocal about what they were feeling positive about or

what their concerns were.

We're very confident about the information we intend to push out after our upcoming March event, and I feel like the phase will be shifting from direct communication to more major information updates. Of course, the team is still planning to engage with the community, and will not suddenly cancel the community initiatives like the Active Time Report.

You released the Episode Duscae demo, and then updated it a few months later based on feedback. That's really uncommon. Would you ever do that again with another project?

I don't envision doing something similar again. Episode Duscae was the first time we were mastering something that was open-world, an action/RPG that included a special feature – Noctis' warp strike. So, we did kind of struggle a bit in terms of mastering that type of game. We couldn't do everything we wanted to do. We discussed it as a team and decided to go the step further and address the features we couldn't when we first released the demo. We wanted to push that through for ourselves, but also in appreciation for the fans who had waited for so long.

Fans expect to see certain things in Final Fantasy, from Chocobos to summons. With the inclusion of so many familiar elements, what do you do to ensure players are still surprised?

It's not a specific list of things we do, it's more of an experiential thing. Bringing these "experiential surprises" is what we focus on to differentiate it. For example, in Final Fantasy XV, the open-world aspect and continuing on a journey through a vast land. Or, with summons, we try to bring them in as though they really inhabit that environment, which connects to the characters and other elements. And those two examples are things that we had set as a backbone early in development, because we also had to develop the technology.

We see many RPG elements – like rich stories and character growth – across games of all sorts today. What do you think RPGs as a dedicated genre can deliver that the hybridizations don't?

Using Final Fantasy XV as an example, I think it's that time spent with your comrades and building that relationship. Players will kind of grow themselves as they take this journey with the party, so when you reach the end of the game, you are synchronized with the character and feel the same satisfaction from the experience. \

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994

Tabata graduates from Teikyo University where he studies economics

1994

Tabata gets his first game industry job at Tecmo. Captain Tsubasa V, a soccer game for SNES, is the first title he works on

2004

After spending time working freelance, Tabata joins Square. His first project with the company is the mobile game Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII

2007

Tabata directs the PSP title Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII, which expands on the characters and story of Final Fantasy VII. The game releases in Japan, and a North American release follows in 2008

2011

Another spin-off, Final Fantasy Type-0, is Tabata's next game. It releases in Japan on PSP, but this version of the game does not come to North America

2012

Internally, Square Enix shifts direction on Final Fantasy Versus XIII, and Tabata is appointed the co-director of the now-renamed Final Fantasy XV (working alongside original director Tetsuya Nomura)

2014

Square Enix restructures the company's development process and organization, and Tabata is made the head of the newly created Business Division 2, as well as sole director of Final Fantasy XV

2015

Final Fantasy Type-0 HD releases in North America, a remastered version of the original for PS4, Xbox One, and PC. Tabata and his team also release (and later update) a playable demo of Final Fantasy XV entitled Episode Duscae

Standing Tall

Rounding Up The Best Video Game Figures

1 Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain Venom Snake

We've been bitten by Square Enix's line of Play Arts Kai figures, but we don't want the anti-venom. This version of Snake features new joint structures that allow for smooth articulation at the elbows, knees, neck, ankles, and shoulders. A flexible resin maintains a natural look while allowing for a wider range of motion. Snake comes packaged with interchangeable head, hands, and weapons parts. Fulton yours back to Mother Base before he sneaks away.

\$120 | store.na.square-enix.com

by Ben Reeves



2 Ganon's Puppet Zelda

After Ganon corrupts Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, the would-be queen turns her menacing stare on Link. This recreation from First 4 Figures stands 15 inches tall, is cast in high-quality polystone, and is hand-painted.

\$349 | first4figures.com



6 Rise Of The Tomb Raider Lara Croft

Geared up to survive a harsh Siberian winter, an army of undead soldiers, or a fall down a 120-foot waterfall, this 10-inch version of Lara from Square Enix's line of Play Arts Kai figures comes with a bow, arrows, knife, handgun, ice axe, and interchangeable hands.

\$139 | store.na.square-enix.com



3 Amaterasu From Okami

The only animal who can terrify the forest with a brush-stroke, Amaterasu is the fierce goddess of the sun. This gorgeous 12-inch statue from First 4 Figures features her howling majestically at the constellations.

\$349 | first4figures.com

4 The Elder Scrolls Skyrim Nord

Nords are natural-born warriors built to withstand the frozen wilds of Skyrim, and this 19-inch statue from Gaming Heads will stand head-and-shoulders above your other figures.

\$329 | gamingheads.com

5 Kratos On Throne

After brutally defeating the ancient Greek gods, Kratos takes a seat as the newest member of the pantheon. This giant statue from Gaming Heads isn't for those with limited shelf space; the tip of Kratos' throne stands 29 inches high.

\$479 | gamingheads.com



7 Warcraft Gul'Dan

Based on Legendary Pictures' upcoming film directed by Duncan Jones (*Moon*, *Source Code*), this fan-favorite orc shaman essentially made a deal with the devil to increase his power, but he'll also look great on your desk.

\$599 | gentlegiantltd.com

8 Bishoujo Tali'Zorah

Kotobukiya has been doing artful interpretations of some of our favorite female heroines for years, but we're glad they finally turned an eye toward Mass Effect for this nine-inch rendition of Tali complete with Quarian Reegar Carbine.

\$79.99 | store.kotous.com

9 Bloodborne Hunter

Carefully recreating the hunter from the cover of From Software's Lovecraft-laden action title, Gecco's 12-inch statue dons the iconic Hunter Set while holding a Saw Cleaver in one hand and a Hunter Blunderbuss in the other.

\$299 | geccodirect-intl.ocnk.net



THE ART OF STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

This art book gives fans a behind-the-scenes tour through Lucasfilm's art departments, chronicles the creation of *The Force Awakens'* new worlds and characters, and includes interviews with the film's creative leads.

\$40.00
abramsbooks.com

PHOENIX IV: THE HISTORY OF THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY BY LEONARD HERMAN

Leonard Herman's comprehensive look at the video game industry and its technological innovations is the perfect resource material for gamers. The first update since 2001, this edition includes everything from Sony's PS3 to Microsoft's Kinect to Nintendo's Amiibos.

\$24.95
rolentapress.com

SHERLOCK: THE ABOMINABLE BRIDE

Fans have to wait a little longer for the return of Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss' dizzyingly clever fourth season of *Sherlock*, but this holiday special about a ghost bride that haunts the streets of Victorian London is a great appetizer.

\$17.99
shop.bbc.com



VR Is The Future, But The Future Isn't Now

by Daniel Tack, PC Editor

Virtual reality promises to take gaming to new heights, offering unparalleled experiences and worlds that we've only been able to dream about. This isn't the first time bold new technology has come into the gaming world, and despite genuine enthusiasm for the potential of the platforms, there are serious factors that could keep the VR flight from taking off. While I firmly believe that VR is the future of gaming, upcoming offerings face significant hurdles to becoming the experience that redefines the medium.

The Price Is Simply Too High

Everyone is talking about the Rift's \$599 price tag that Oculus announced earlier this year, and with good reason. When the same figure was dropped for the PS3 years ago, the gaming world was stunned, and that price tag still commands an eyebrow raise today. Factor in that the Oculus doesn't come with the new touch controllers that you'll probably also want to acquire, and the need for a mid-to-high end PC, and this technology is ultra-expensive right now. It's far beyond the means of the average consumer, and certainly out of range for the gamer who can only grab a few titles a year for his or her preferred platform.

Considering 63 percent of Americans are a paycheck away from financial ruin, upcoming VR tech is essentially limited to enthusiasts and early adopters for now. As with all technology we can expect the price to go down as the years go by, but if VR flutters out of favor with publishers, developers, and consumers before then, we could see it dropping off the radar yet again, only to be revived years down the road when pricing is more reasonable for the average gamer.

Promotion Is A Puzzle

VR has a marketing hurdle that's especially difficult to overcome when combined with the price tag – there's no way to get an idea how it looks and plays without strapping a set to your head. Stage demos are awkward beyond belief and don't convey the gameplay or experience in any meaningful way. Whether this is solved by in-store demos or some other marketing method, it's hard for consumers to justify dropping a huge chunk of change without knowing what they're getting.

Publishers And Developers May Be Reticent To Pave The Way

While there are potentially solid games out there that I've had the chance to experience myself like *EVE: Valkyrie*, one of the big questions for VR is where are the games? Where are the system sellers? If they're out there, I sure haven't seen them. Will developers and publishers take the risks to commit resources toward VR in this early stage when things are still in flux? This creates a dire chicken/egg situation; if no one gets on board early to make those defining experiences that will blow people away and move units, will anyone ever do it?

Someone needs to step up and prove that big games, big IPs, and genre-defining experiences can live on the new tech before others will be willing to wade into unproven waters. The question right now is who will take that risk and allocate those resources? We can push the potential of the technology all we want, but it needs system sellers to make it happen.

It May Be A Virtual Reality, But The Physical Issues Are Real

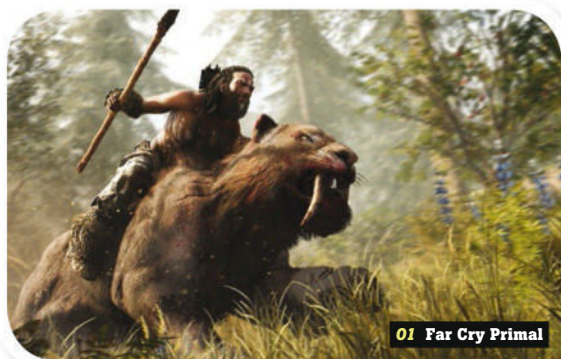
Even if you don't suffer a bout of nausea during a virtual reality session (something the newer models are improving), there's still the question about long-term sessions and long-term use of the technology. It's easy to sit on the couch and blast away for hours on end with a non-VR title, but we don't know if the same can be said for immersion in virtual worlds. It's unfathomable to me to consider using the upcoming models for even an hour or two, much less a marathon gaming session.

This could limit what genres and styles of games are viable VR fare. Will the platform be limited to snack-session "experimental, exploratory" experiences, eschewing many of gaming's most popular genres? Everyone wants that epic, full-scale VR MMORPG, but is the technology ready to make that happen?

Final Thoughts And The Future

I truly believe that VR is the future for games and gaming – but I don't believe that future is now. The technology needs significant iteration and improvement before it can become the widely adopted game-changer the industry wants to bring new experiences to the living room and beyond. I'm certainly not saying that VR is "dead on arrival" or anything so hyperbolic, but I do believe that the high price combined with the other factors mentioned above is creating a difficult environment for the technology to survive and thrive today. ♦

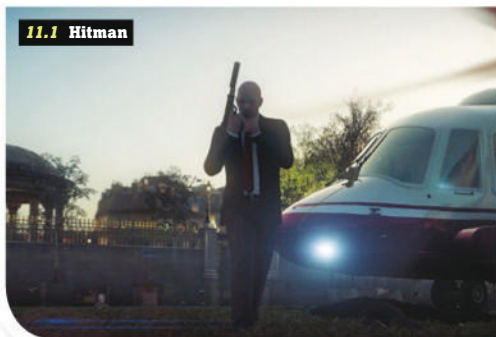
The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer



01 Far Cry Primal



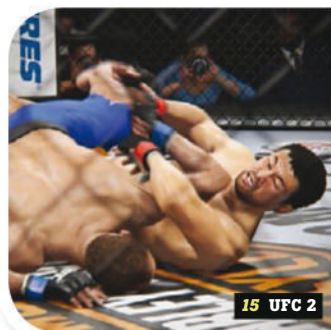
08 The Division



11.1 Hitman



29 MLB The Show 16



15 UFC 2



18

March

01 New Releases

- › Far Cry Primal (PC)
- › Heavy Rain (PS4)
- › The Witch and the Hundred Knight: Revival Edition (PS4)
- › Mortal Kombat XL (PS4, Xbox One)

02 DC Turns 50

A good number of DC's ongoing comic series reach their 50th issues. Among them are *Batman* (a story that welcomes back Bruce Wayne as the Bat), *Superman*, *Action Comics*, *Aquaman*, *Batgirl*, *Catwoman*, *The Flash* and others. Each ships with standard and variant polybagged editions.

04.1 Zootopia

For years, Pixar was the king of the CGI motion-picture world, but Disney has impressed of late with films like *Tangled* and *Frozen*. The studio's next film, *Zootopia*, opens in theaters today, and introduces us to the concept of a mammal metropolis. Animals of every variety live like human beings.

04.2 TV Premieres

March's television slate begins today with the return of Netflix's *House of Cards*, and rolls into March 8's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* on ABC, March 18's *Daredevil* on Netflix, and March 30's new show *The Path*, which is Hulu's look at life inside a religious cult starring Aaron Paul and Michelle Monaghan.

08 New Releases

- › The Division (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

11.1 New Releases

- › Hitman (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

11.2 SXSW Gaming Expo

Last year's South by Southwest gaming conference didn't offer much in terms of announcements or entertainment on the show floor, but featured a fair number of panels and talks from key video game talent. The show looks to be repeating this pattern this year with numerous panels taking center stage across the show's five days, including Robert

Kirkman talking about *The Walking Dead* video games.

14 GDC 2016

This three-day expo is the show all aspiring game developers should go to for recruiting purposes. GDC is also chock full with game reveals, hands-on sessions with new titles, and the annual Choice Awards show.

15.1 Too Many Cons

Today welcomes three different gaming-related conventions: WonderCon 2016 in Anaheim, California, Sakura-Con 2016 in Seattle, Washington, and Insomnia57 in Birmingham, England.

15.2 New Releases

- › UFC 2 (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Samurai Warriors 4: Empires (PS4, PS3, Vita)

18.1 Allegiant

From Katniss Everdeen to Harry Potter, theatergoers love watching teenage kids save the world as the adults stand by and do nothing. Next to zombies and superheroes, this is the movie concept people seem to like the most these days. Theaters welcome another one

of these films today. *Allegiant*, the final installment in the *Divergent* trilogy, shows how teenagers with sick parkour skills can save the planet.

18.2 New Releases

- › Pokkén Tournament (Wii U)

22 New Releases

- › Lichdom: Battlemage (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Stranger of Sword City (Vita)

25.1 New Releases

- › Hyrule Warriors: Legends (3DS)

25.2 Batman v Superman: Dawn Of Justice

Comic fans are holding their breaths, hoping that DC and director Zack Snyder don't screw up today's theatrical release, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Ben Affleck as Batman is worrisome. Seeing Lex Luthor with hair is worrisome. Heck, just Superman being Superman is worrisome. Chant with us: Please don't suck. Please don't suck. Please don't suck.

29 New Releases

- › MLB The Show 16 (PS4, PS3)
- › Nights of Azure (PS4)

2016



**TT Fusion takes on the biggest franchise around
with Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens**

by Jeff Cork



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PC • PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • 3DS • Vita

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
TT Fusion

» **Release**
June 28

Star Wars: The Force Awakens smashed box-office records weeks before and after its release, showing audiences still have a great deal of love and appreciation for the franchise. In a few months, players will be able to do a little smashing of their own as they play through a slightly less serious version of the film's epic story courtesy of TT Games. This month, we take an exclusive look at *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and see why it's TT Fusion's most ambitious project yet.



Star Wars and TT Games are closely intertwined.

More than a decade ago, developer Traveller's Tales assembled *Lego Star Wars: The Videogame*, a whimsical retelling of the prequel trilogy. Fans loved seeing Star Wars interpreted with Lego bricks, and the studio soon went all-in on Lego games. Since then, TT Games has produced Lego games based on some of the biggest film and literary franchises around, including *Indiana Jones*, *Harry Potter*, *Jurassic Park*, and more.

Five years have passed since the last *Lego Star Wars* game, *Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars*, and TT Games was eager to return to the franchise that put the company on the star map. "We don't take anything for granted, but at the same time perhaps there is a sense of destiny about returning to that wonderful universe that we had so much

fun with, and where we were so successful before," says Jonathan Smith, head of production and strategic direction at TT Games. "It is certainly an honor and a privilege to be doing so."

That enthusiasm is clear at TT Fusion's offices in Wilmslow, England. Visit nearly any games studio and you're bound to spot cubicles decorated with Lego creations and assorted Star Wars memorabilia. Those cultural touchstones are present here, as is the excitement (and occasional mentions of disbelief) that these fans are actually able to work in the worlds they love so much. Even better than playing in *The Force Awakens'* world, the team is helping to fill in several gaps in fan knowledge thanks to a variety of tantalizing side content.



Poe Dameron is a great pilot, but perhaps you can show him up

Nostalgia Play

Part of *The Force Awakens*' appeal is it shows something we haven't seen much of in recent Star Wars media: a beginning. We're not in a world that's populated by masters and experts; as the film's title suggests, the force is returning after being dormant for some time. That departure from prequel-era content gave the creative team at TT Fusion some fuel to shift the focus away from past lightsaber-heavy Star Wars games and come up with some interesting new systems to supplement the brick-smashing co-op action.

"When we find out what we're working on, we're not going to reinvent the wheel, because it's a good wheel – we don't need to," says Mike Taylor, head of design at TT Fusion. Every property has its own unique components baked into it, and the key is finding those and transforming them into interesting gameplay elements. "The easy reference in *Jurassic World* is that you've got dinosaurs to play around with, so we hooked into the core cool features of the new IPs. In *The Force Awakens*, the Force is awakening, and that's a really good area to use. It makes the game different, which is good, because we're not exactly the same as the other Star Wars games. It's more focused on the blaster battles and this really cool new set of interesting characters to work with."

Unlike past Lego Star Wars games – and most of TT Games' work in general – which have bundled together several films or TV seasons, *The Force Awakens* is built around a single movie. If you're a fan of *The Force Awakens*, you know that it's loaded to the gills with interesting action sequences and areas ripe for gameplay. To further supplement the game, TT Fusion is adding several meaty side stories and additional content not seen in the movie. I get a sense of that, as well as a look at some of the new systems, in the first gameplay demo, which is centered on *Return of the Jedi*.

I'm an anomaly among Star Wars fans, in that Jedi is my favorite entry in the series. Even though George Lucas' incessant CGI fiddling practically ruins moments such as Jabba's palace (make that song stop!) and the Sarlacc pit, I think it's the most evenly paced and interesting film in the bunch. Yes, even after factoring in the Ewoks. Still it's strange that my first look at *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is set on the familiar forest moon of Endor. TT Games has its reasons, though. "That's an action-packed level, and we thought it would be nice to revisit where we left the films all those years ago," Taylor says.

Game director Jamie Eden moves Chewbacca and a pre-general Princess Leia around the forest floor, and it's a sharp reminder of just how much the games have improved over the past decade. "It's hard not to make comparisons to the early Star Wars games," Taylor says. "One of the big things is obviously we've got lots more going on these days with the hardware, so you have lots of enemies on screen and background activity."

In this case, the background activity includes stormtroopers off in the distance, marauding AT-STs, and plenty of red blaster bolts whizzing around among the trees. Chewie and her worshipfulness aren't the type to stand back and watch; the pair takes on swarms of the white-armored baddies. Familiar moments punctuate the action, such as seeing an Ewok vainly try to grab one of the bipedal vehicle's feet or another swoop down in a glider. So far, it seems like a nicer-looking version of a battle I've participated in before.

The first big wrinkle occurs when the duo comes across a small pile of bouncing bricks, a sight that's bound to be familiar to people who have played any of the previous 20-plus Lego games. This time around, TT Fusion is taking a slightly different approach to the interaction. Instead of having players simply transform those piles into the finished product – whether it's a machine to defeat enemies, a vehicle to solve a puzzle, or something silly – they have to do something new: make a decision.



Expect moments of levity throughout, even as the game deals with the film's more shocking moments

More Ways To Build

As Eden approaches the bricks, the ghostly outlines of two creations appear, showing the possible building options. TT Fusion is calling this deviation from tradition the multibuild.

In this situation, players have to somehow travel over a ledge to continue on. Unfortunately, it's too high for a traditional jump. Players can choose to build an object that appears on either side of the screen. Building the option to the right creates a trampoline, which grants access to a hidden minikit. After collecting the item, Chewie drops back down and smashes the bouncy creation. It reverts back to its raw components, which are then used to create a trampoline on the left that allows players to continue on.

"This is an example of a very simple one," Taylor says. "Obviously, it's optional – you don't have to build the one to the right. We've got some examples coming up where it's more puzzle based, where you actually have to think about what to build first in order to complete a puzzle."

Our heroes advance, with Leia pausing to use her grappling hook to free a net-bound Wicket. The Ewok's tiny size allows him to crawl into tiny spaces, in this case a Lego nook under a tree that leads to a bounty of buildable bricks. These can be used to build a ladder or climbable wall surface, one of which leads to another minikit. Forgoing the collectible, Chewie heads into the trees to set up a log trap that takes out the AT-ST by simultaneously smashing it from both sides.

Moving past the AT-ST's smoldering legs, our group enters a section that highlights yet another new gameplay element. "Obviously you've seen the film, and the Force has awakened and there aren't hundreds of characters Force-pushing themselves around – it's quite low key," Taylor says. "There's more of an emphasis on blaster battles, so we've put a lot of effort into that side of things." What this means is, for the first time in a Lego game, players can participate in what amounts to a cover-based shooter.

Han and Chewie crouch behind logs as a variety of stormtroopers and speeder-bike pilots line the edge of the forest. The pair pick off the Imperial goons one by one, popping up and taking their shots when it's safe and retreating when things get hairy.

"There's the danger that people might associate that type of gameplay with headshots and quite adult-type gameplay," Taylor says. "We had to look at ways to make that



kid-friendly and a bit more just for fun." One obvious way is how headshots aren't rewarded with gore – this is a Lego game, after all – but with funny animations such as the target's helmet getting knocked backward and the wearer staggering out of sight. "The idea is that in some of these sections there will be enemies that are entrenched and you can't get because they're just poking their head over the top or they're shielded so you have to use your abilities in certain circumstances to take out the guys and progress."

Eden finishes up the battle, and moves his group of heroes forward. I can't help but grimace as he coolly passes up every spinning Lego stud in favor of progression. Is he some kind of emotionless droid? "It's still really hard to go past them," he says with a laugh when I point it out. "I'm trying my best now."



TT GAMES, BRICK BY BRICK

When you're talking about Lego video games, several names swirl around. While TT Games, Traveller's Tales, and TT Fusion have more than a few consonants in common, they're not interchangeable. Put simply, TT Games is the overarching company under which Traveller's Tales and TT Fusion develop their games. Those two studios share some resources, including QA, technology and engine teams, and a cutscene department. Traveller's Tales is based in Knutsford, England, and was founded in 1989. TT Fusion, a few miles away in Wilmslow, was formerly named Embryonic before TT Games acquired it in 2007. Later that year, Warner Bros. Interactive purchased TT Games.

Space battles have been a *Star Wars* staple from the beginning, and there are plenty of them in the game

New Friends, Old Enemies

Ahead, Wicket has to push a box, but he isn't strong enough to pull it off. Fortunately, Ewoks are social animals, and the character takes advantage of his command ability to recruit some buddies. With several furry friends trailing behind him, they push the box over the edge and celebrate their triumph with a victory dance. Wicket isn't the only character with the ability; Captain Phasma is at least one other character that Taylor says can recruit helpers, though in her case it's likely that her underlings won't be as cute.

These bricks offer several new possibilities, including some that we won't be able to take advantage of quite yet. One builds a panel that can only be operated by an astromech droid, such as R2-D2 or BB-8. Looking around, we spot R2, but he's trapped underneath a fallen log. Another multibuild option creates a path to a minikit. The final option is the most effective one we spy, creating a smaller version of an AT-ST. Han mounts the vehicle and destroys the log, freeing our hapless droid hero. Now that R2 is here, he's added to the roster and operates a newly built mechanical lift that lets the group advance using a hacking minigame based on the spinning rotors that R2 typically interfaces with.

After hijacking another AT-ST, Han and company blast through a horde of stormtroopers, clearing a path through some Lego brambles and opening up bridge access by destroying bags of rocks being used as counterweights.

At the shield generator, players are given yet another multibuild opportunity, but this one's slightly different from the ones we've seen before. Some of these builds are permanent, like the builds of the past, so you can only see the



The Endor level lets players see what Han, Leia, Chewie, and Luke were like in their prime

outcome of one of the builds in a single playthrough. Players who return to the level in freeplay are encouraged to try the other option to see what that does. Eden decides to build a hat dispenser – a callback from the early Lego Star Wars games – which lets him dupe the guards inside into opening the building's door. "The other option is a projector that plays *A New Hope*, and attracts the enemies out of the base because they want to watch the film," Taylor says.

These multibuilds are fun to see in action, but according to Marin Palmer, TT Fusion's head of Lego integration, they've

also been tricky to implement. “It was always a challenge in previous games – in this game it’s double the challenge, because you have to make multiple things out of the pieces and they have to have different functionalities, they have to look different,” he says. “We want people to feel like they can make multiple things out of the same pile of bricks.” Because of the team’s commitment to authenticity, none of the builds in the game are fudged, either. If you see something built from Lego elements in the game, you can build it in real-world Lego – no cheats are allowed.

The demo then jumps to the Death Star II, where Luke has confronted Emperor Palpatine in a play to get his father to convert to the light side. Luke hands Darth Vader a childish crayon drawing he made of his father in an attempt to show that he senses there’s still good in him. Darth considers the drawing for a few moments, wiping at his eyes with his little minifigure hand. Rather than have Luke and Vader battle one another, their initial battle is shown in a cutscene. That way,

two players can team up against the emperor.

Palpatine is perched in his throne, cackling at the Skywalkers. He repels their lightsaber attacks, but the duo can use their Force abilities on some nearby decorative elements. One pinches Palpatine’s head and spins him around; another grabs his legs and shakes him.

Other phases of the battle include building miniature TIE fighters and X-wings to attack Palpatine. They throw explosive tanks to penetrate a shield of swirling debris. It builds to a button-mashing standoff where Vader endures repeated Force

lightning attacks and hurls the foul leader into the abyss. Looking back at the older version of this fight from Traveller’s Tales’ original trilogy game, it’s clear that the Lego games have become far more sophisticated. Where the previous battle featured sections of building and force manipulation that killed the overall pacing, this incarnation is much more exciting to watch. It doesn’t hurt that Palpatine sticks around for the battle instead of fleeing at regular intervals like he did before.

The familiar helmet-removal scene takes place, though there’s a funny new twist. When Luke removes it, young Anakin’s smiling head is revealed. Luke looks dismayed and shakes Vader’s helmet, whereupon the more familiar Humpty Dumpty-style visage drops out. After a quick Lego head swap the scene continues.

The level concludes with players steering the *Millennium Falcon* inside the newly exposed Death Star. The interior gives players room to fly with greater freedom than seen before in a Lego game. “Previously in Star Wars games you sort of flew in one plane and you pressed a button to go down to another plane, but now it’s sort of free-roaming flight where you want to fly, and it’s feeling good,” Taylor says. After taking out the core and its various shielding elements with photon torpedoes, our heroes escape just as the base explodes. Among the wreckage is a stormtrooper in a bathtub, his rubber ducky floating away. Luke passes by in an Imperial shuttle moments later and tries to grab the toy, but it’s just out of reach.

The sequence ends with a celebratory scene in the Ewok village, and a funny bit including a character crashing the ending with Yoda and Obi Wan’s force apparitions. Going back to Endor might not be the most interesting part of the game for superfans, but it’s certainly a great refresher on what our heroes were up to before we catch up with them again.

LEGO STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS BY THE NUMBERS

Levels, Including
Force Awakens
and Additional Content

18

Hub Worlds

5

(Jakku, Takodana Castle, Starkiller
Base, D’Qar, The Millennium Falcon)

Characters

**More than
200**

Vehicles

**More than
40,**

including spacecraft
and microfighters





Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens features new cover-based blaster battles, seen here

The Force, Awakened

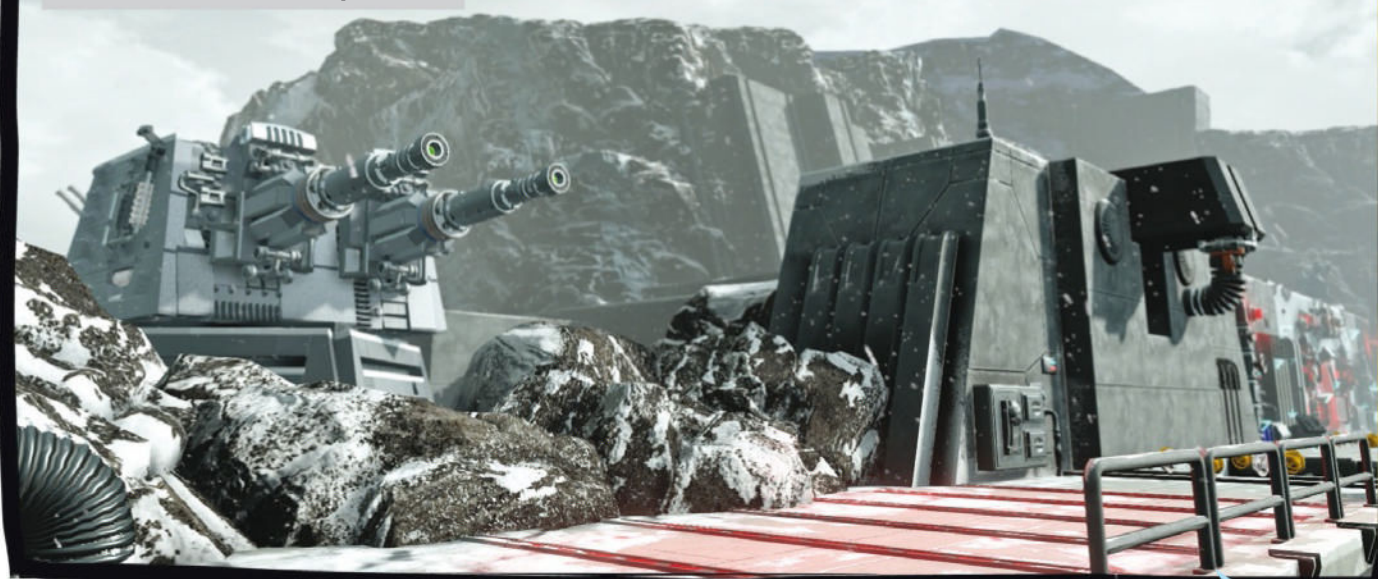
An incredible wall of secrecy was erected around *The Force Awakens* before its release, and it extended to TT Games. Even though the creative team had access to much of the story (after entering a specially secured room with video surveillance in TT Fusion's offices), several key elements were kept under wraps. While it's disappointing that the Lego game wasn't available at launch – that honor went to the Disney Infinity 3.0 Force Awakens playset – TT Fusion's creative team had the benefit of seeing the film during development, allowing them to create the most authentic adaptation possible – bananas, rubber duckies, and sight gags notwithstanding.

Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens features 10 levels based on the film. In addition, there are six so-called bridge levels, the Endor level we saw in the demo, and an epilogue level based on the film's final moments. Those bridge levels are especially intriguing, and they're the fruit of a close working relationship with LucasFilm. "As a massive Star Wars fan, that's one of the most exciting things about the game,"

Taylor says. "We've invented planet names and character names and concepted these things and we're helping to create canon and backstory for the events of *The Force Awakens*, so it's really exciting."

Players access this additional story content by collecting gold bricks scattered in levels and in the five hub worlds. If you played Lego Marvel Super Heroes and unlocked the Deadpool levels, you have a sense of the flow. As you wander around the hub, you may notice special character interactions that provide opportunities to hear their stories via gameplay flashbacks. Players who aren't interested in these additional stories can simply mainline the film missions. However, new missions are available to be unlocked after completing every two levels in the game. TT Games is cagey when it comes to specifics, and it's likely that we'd get dropped into a Rancor pit if we said too much. For now, we can say players get to play through the backstory explaining the origins of C-3PO's red arm, and also follow Han and Chewie as they hunt down their vicious Rathtar cargo, a.k.a. those hungry mouths with the tentacles.

Han, Finn, and Chewie have to infiltrate Starkiller Base to lower the weapon's shields





Sand Brawlers

Jakku is home to several key moments in *The Force Awakens*, which makes it a perfect place to continue our demo. As much fun as it was to catch up with Chewie and Han, I'm eager to see new sights – sights that include, as I soon discover, a reunion with Chewie and Han.

We start right in the thick of things, with Rey piloting the *Millennium Falcon* around the familiar site of a crashed star destroyer. It was a memorable part of the trailers, and TT Fusion was inspired by the same footage fans drooled over. "In the trailer there are obviously iconic camera shots, and there are a lot of cool shots in the film that we try to replicate – weaving, tilt – and we try to get that in wherever possible," says game director Jamie Eden. Sure enough, there's a moment where the in-game camera rises off the sandy surface with the ship and stalls alongside the

Falcon that's instantly recognizable.

This segment switches between on-rails sections, where Rey has to navigate the wreckage and other obstacles while dealing with First Order TIE Fighters, and more open arena-style areas, where the objective is to destroy a specific number of the pesky ships. The battle (and demo) concludes with a chase through the abandoned star destroyer.

Next, we take a look at some gameplay from the game's beginning, where pilot Poe Dameron and his trusty astromech BB-8 are in Lor Sen Tekka's village after retrieving some crucial intel. Their presence has alerted the villainous First Order. "Poe being the hero, he can't leave the villagers on their own, so he's going to help them out," Eden says.

The duo doesn't have much time, so they get to work. The spherical droid can roll on special pads, which allow players to manipulate objects. In this case, it brings down a resistance terminal that, after completing a simple letter-matching hacking minigame, gives villagers access to weapons to defend themselves.

Moving on, Poe uses his grappling hook to pull more parts down for another multibuild. One option creates a catapult to launch BB-8 up, where he can use a crane control to open another weapons storehouse. BB-8 is a really fun-looking character, and it seems as though he'll be equally fun in the game. The droid is speedy, and he can knock enemies down – perhaps making up for his comparatively weak offensive arsenal. Also, his resemblance to a ball wasn't lost on the designers at TT Fusion. He's used to great effect in optional activities like knocking down vases arranged like bowling pins or hopping into a launcher to make a basketball shot.

The final cache opens up with help from a hapless Gonk droid, who after a little prodding from our round friend, knocks a box open by tumbling down upon it.

TT Fusion says it's improved the flight controls, which is a welcome change from past games



TACKLING THE TOUGH STUFF

TT Games has worked on games that have mature themes and situations in the past, so adapting the events featured in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* isn't completely new territory. We spoke with one of the game's two cutscene leads, Phil Gray, to learn more about the art of working with potentially disturbing subject matter and adapting it to Lego. *Note: This feature contains several Force Awakens spoilers.*

"When we have to show characters dying or being injured – quite traumatic events – and in previous games there's been a few, where you go, 'How are we going to do that?' That's actually quite a nice springboard for the creative process," Gray says. "We've become aware of that over the years, so we have this feeling that we know what is suitable." He cites *Jurassic Park* as a good example of their approach. If you recall the first film, a lawyer is chomped by a hungry T-Rex. In *Lego Jurassic World*, the dinosaur's mouth opens, revealing the minifigure safely inside its mouth, brushing the creature's teeth. One of the goals is to keep the body count to zero, or as close as possible.

Boromir's sacrifice in *The Fellowship of the Ring* was another tricky one. Gray recalls a long e-mail chain about that death. "There was this big list; 'No to this one, yes to a chicken, yes to a banana.' That's sort of why some things tend to come back, because they're safe objects. We know that a banana's not going to upset anybody, or a chicken or a pig, because they tend to be quite safe."

In *The Force Awakens*, we're introduced to Kylo Ren and his furious temper early on as he tries to intimidate Lor Sen Tekka about Luke Skywalker's location. Needless to say, it ends badly for Lor Sen Tekka, and we learn that Ren's lightsaber is indeed functional. In the game, it's a moment played for laughs, as Ren's saber blinks out and the character repeatedly hits the weapon like it's a flashlight that's running low on battery power.

"That cutscene, is the first time you see Kylo Ren," Gray says. "Who is this guy? It's balancing that he's quite an intimidating baddie, and then what can we do? All Jedi make their own lightsabers, so he's made his. In the story he hasn't finished his training because he's killed all of them and Luke's gone. ...That's the point, he can't use it as it's meant to, so he Force chokes him away, which means that [Lor Sen Tekka] can then turn up later on in another cutscene, which is different from the film – alive and sort of floating past the camera. That helps the idea that he's not dead – we didn't kill him. That helps with the way the Lego games work, because when you die in a Lego game you don't really die, and you can collect the characters."

Gray says part of the reason the humor in the Lego games works is because the characters aren't necessarily in on the joke. "He thinks he's Kylo Ren, it's not like, 'Hey is this some kind of crazy video game? Look to camera, wink.'"

Then there's the matter of the film's biggest

death. If you've seen the movie, you know the one. "I think we'll try to make it as funny as we can," Gray says, "and you don't know what's in store. Darth Maul falls down a pit in the end of *The Phantom Menace*, but in *The Clone Wars* he comes back with robot legs."

Gray says that moment was originally in the mid-section of a level, which sucked away some of its impact. "Now, it's the end of a level, so you do something and it's the end of the level, so it gives it more of a, 'Oh, that's just happened,' sort of status rather than, 'Right now you've got to go and blow up this.' So the design team decided to incorporate that, which was a nice way of developing the story."

The team had access to the screenplay in various forms, but Gray said that seeing the finished film generated new opportunities for gags that they might not have otherwise considered. "There's a bit where they're just about to take off and they're all getting ready, and Finn's loading up the explosives, and there's just a shot of Snap [Wexley] drilling into his X-wing," Gray says. "Like there isn't enough ground crew or he doesn't trust the ground crew. Like he's going, 'You know what? I'm going to put a shelf there.' Or he's got a hook to hang his helmet on. But he's just there drilling into the back of his X-wing. And I thought if we did that, we'd get comments back going, 'Why is he drilling into his X-wing?' So we have to get that in. It's like they were on set that day and they said, 'Just look busy.'"

Poe's help doesn't come a moment too soon. Phasma and her First Order stormtroopers descend from their shuttles and begin fighting the newly armed villagers. One hesitates for a moment, and a furious lady throws fruit at him. That character, the stormtrooper designated FN-2187, ends up marked with a juicy green splat in his helmet – a decidedly G-rated version of what happens in the film to visually separate Finn from his more mayhem-minded compatriots.

Poe and BB-8 work to escape the carnage, entering another cover-shooting section. TIE Fighters scream overhead during the fight, which ends after Poe blasts a conveniently placed explosive barrel to take out an attacker seated in a mounted turret. Lego flames fan out in the aftermath, but they're quickly doused.

Ahead, we learn fire seems to be a go-to play for the First Order. A dome-shaped energy shield protects several stormtroopers, including one who's gleefully spraying out a jet of flame. Smashing a few objects (while remaining at a respectful distance from the attacker) provides Poe and BB-8 a pair of multibuild options. "The options are to either build a mining spider droid or to build something tasty for them to come out and enjoy," Eden says. He decides to take the more comical route. Poe builds a familiar looking giant red and white container, which is hit by the flames. It's popcorn!

The excited stormtroopers run out of the dome and collect the food – with one even taking off his helmet to collect the kernels. Poe seizes upon this lack of judgment and beats them all up.

"I prefer my description of the droid," adds Mike Taylor, TT Fusion's head of design. "Mine is a crab assassination droid, which sounds a bit cooler. It starts spinning, burrows down into the ground." From there, it grabs the flametrooper from below, and pulls them out of sight. "It's sort of *Jaws*-like," Taylor says.

The last puzzle we encounter involves getting past – you guessed it – more fire. This time, it's a massive wall of flame that a mere bucket of water won't extinguish. Fortunately, BB-8 is here to the rescue. He's able to maneuver a freshly built water tank – complete with swimming goldfish – over the obstacle and douse it with a huge splash. Problem solved.

For our heroes, unfortunately, their troubles are just beginning. After giving BB-8 some valuable information, Poe is taken into custody by Finn. Plenty of Lego humor is interspersed in those final moments, including Kylo Ren's troubles with a malfunctioning lightsaber, and Captain Phasma's weapons check, which turns up the detail that Finn has been supposedly menacing the villagers with...a banana.

Reunited

In our final demo, we skip ahead to a section set on Starkiller Base. This snowy area is home to the First Order's powerful weapon, as well as one of the film's most shocking moments (that shall remain undescribed here).

This icy level features Han, Finn, and Chewie as they try to lower the defenses around the base. Han definitely looks older than he did in the Endor level, but Chewie looks nearly identical. Is he combing in some Wookiee Just for Men into his pelt every night?

At this point in the story, Finn has a lightsaber in his possession, which he can use to slice open a wall to get parts to build an ice-melting cannon. A few First Order droids hover around, but they're no match for our team's combined firepower. "That's one of the things we worked quite closely with Lucas on," Eden says. "We needed some sort of drone droid-type NPC for this area, and they supplied us with these guys in this location that could be used."

It's frigid out, and the characters leave adorable little square footprints behind them in the snow. Even though you might think the snowtroopers are accustomed to working in such conditions, a multibuild snow blower confuses several of them to the point of walking off the edge of a cliff. Another multibuild shows a more complicated puzzle. Players have to juggle three different builds to keep a ball of energy travelling through a network of pipes. It's somewhat similar to what TT Games' contemporaries at Rocksteady did with a few Riddler Trophies in *Batman: Arkham Knight*.

The group continues to advance along the base's edge, keeping a low profile (thanks to an area-specific set of sneaking animations) and doing their best to avoid enemies. Some pipes break along the way, and Finn has to sneak past the toxic gas using a familiar mask he

nabbed from the *Millennium Falcon*.

That little touch, based on what might otherwise be a throwaway line of dialogue from the movie, shows TT Fusion's attention to detail. "We've tried to be as close as we possibly can," Taylor says. "Right from the start we broke down – based on what we were aware of – sections and went through it with LucasFilm and they signed off on it. As more information became available, we've updated them and made changes and tried to make it as close as possible."

Chewie didn't necessarily build a mini snowspeeder out of bricks to distract a huge turret in the film, but you have to take a certain amount of liberties in a Lego game.

Han scans the area using his quadoculars, exposing a weak spot hidden in a wall that Chewie can blast apart with a thermal detonator. We learned a little more about Han's sidekick in the new movie – and just what he's been packing all along. "One of the things we're trying to get now is you've seen how Chewie's bowcaster works in the new film, it's memorable and distinct from the way that blaster fire works," Eden says. "It's throwing people across the rooms and [has] lots of big impacts. There's a lot of blaster variety in the new film in comparison to the old ones, and again that's something we're trying to get – that they all feel slightly different."

Variations aside, blasters generally have the same effect on stormtroopers – they knock them apart in glorious showers of plastic limbs and collectable Lego studs. When the group clears out the area near the security door, it's Finn's chance to shine. He's a trained sanitation engineer for the First Order, which means he has a little know-how when it comes to opening special terminals. Once inside, it's time to chase down a chrome-domed villain.

The game is focused on *The Force Awakens* content, but there are side stories – including a level based on *Return of the Jedi* highlights



Shields Down

Captain Phasma is inside the base itself, but she's beyond an energy field. Trouble is, you need to get past a security detail to gain access to the area. Fortunately, it's only a hat away. Finn splits from the group and works his way across a narrow plank, eventually wandering into a spa area where some Stormtroopers are taking a relaxing bath in the Jacuzzi pool – while still wearing their helmets. Finn beats them all up (building up his combat multiplier and earning bonus studs in the process) and builds a helmet dispenser once the coast is clear.

Once through the gate, it's nearly time to confront Phasma. That is, after breaking up an impromptu soccer game. Seriously do those guys do any work? We're treated with another blaster battle, where Eden switches between Han and Chewie to get the best view of his opponents. Some guys are hidden behind cover from vantage points, so being alert pays off. Some enemies are now able to build defenses of their own, too, so recognizing which ones are likely to assemble a turret and defeating them before they get the chance is a great way to keep your minifigs intact.

Han uses a grapple point to activate a bridge, but it's quickly filled with baddies. He scans it with his quadoculars to take it out with another thermal detonator – with a little help from Chewie.

Once the area is cleared, it's time to take on Captain Phasma herself. The group surprises her while she's seated and messing around on her cell phone. This boss section is a blaster battle, and cover isn't completely safe. She can fire missiles which show up as crosshairs on the ground. Hunker down near one too long, and you'll take a hit. She jumps around a fair bit, making it tricky to keep crosshairs where they need to be. Eventually, her chair transforms into a missile-launching turret. In short, it's definitely the most exciting thing we've seen from the character, and a vast improvement from the clunkier Lego Star Wars battles of yore. Our team ultimately prevails (of course), and after lowering the shields Phasma is, appropriately enough, dropped into a garbage can.

From what we saw over the course of our visit to TT Fusion, Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens is shaping up to be a nicely refined version of a familiar style of game. To



paraphrase what Taylor said earlier, there's no sense in overhauling everything if you're starting with a strong foundation. That's not to say that the Lego games are in danger of growing stagnant. The multibuilds offer a subtle but meaningful tweak to one of the game's most common interactions, and the cover-based blaster battles provide another opportunity to further capture the exciting and explosive moments from the film.

The past few months have been big for TT Games, with the release of Lego Dimensions, Lego Jurassic World, and the recent release of Lego Marvel's Avengers. That's clearly not lost on the company's head of production and strategic direction, Jonathan Smith. "That gives us really good momentum to return to – from a Lego point of view – our first love of Star Wars and build on all the technology we've developed, all the expertise, all the novel game-design systems, and features that the teams have built in the intervening 10 years to tell a new story that's tied to, oh did I mention, the most successful movie of all time," he says. "That's pretty exciting, to say the least."

Be sure to visit gameinformer.com/forceawakens throughout the month for exclusive video interviews with the game's creative team, extensive behind-the-scenes information, and much more

Starkiller Base can get pretty chilly: it's a good thing Chewie's keeping track of Han's coat






THE MYSTERIOUS DRIFTER

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER'S WORLD DEMANDS ATTENTION,
ALL WITHOUT A SINGLE WORD OF DIALOGUE

BY KYLE HILLIARD



Hyper Light Drifter has no spoken dialogue or written story. A few lines of text appear during the opening moments to discuss small mechanics, but that's the last time you see any words. The way currency works is not immediately apparent, because there are no numbers. You have to test your weapons and upgrades because no tutorial explains their function.

"The main motivation is we want to be subtle and implicit," Hyper Light Drifter's creator Alex Preston says, "Being explicit can ruin the mystery, or you can't make the story quite your own." Everything in Hyper Light Drifter is explained through animation and imagery, and everything is learned through player intuition and experimentation. The result is a narrative led by emotion rather than transparent facts, and gameplay built on discovery instead of tutorial.

From the beginning, Hyper Light Drifter presents a world of mystery and intrigue. The Drifter, the player character, is seen standing amid a collection of dead bodies. A shadowy creature attacks and the scene shifts as he finds himself in front of gigantic humanoid, possibly robotic titans who shatter before him. It's unclear if this sequence is a peek at the history or future of this world, or if it's a dream. When I finally get control of the Drifter, I only take a few steps before he hunches over in pain, coughing as the screen fills with red pixels. Thankfully a health pack is nearby, and one of the few tutorials instructs me how to pick it up and use it. The Drifter is suffering from some kind of sickness, but it does little to debilitate his movement and combat abilities.

The Drifter can blink from one position to another. I zip around the combat field as I encounter my first enemy – a small goblin-like creature who takes exactly three hits to dispatch. Combat is fluid, and though I have the mobility advantage, the goblin can dole out damage quickly if I don't stay on my toes. Battles are thoughtful and fast, without getting overwhelming and even the smallest enemy poses a threat.

The blink ability quickly proves to be much more than a combat mechanic, as I use it to move across chasms and between platforms. Blink has no limit to how much I can use it, and it quickly becomes my main mode of movement, even when there are no obstacles requiring its use.

The Drifter makes his way outside, but the mysterious plague grips him again. As

the screen fills with red pixels, a shadowy creature, perhaps the same one seen in the aforementioned opening, attacks and everything goes black before he wakes in a house surrounded by computer equipment.

Leaving the home reveals a town, and a device that heals and serves as a platform for fast-travel. Anthropomorphic animals and alien creatures mill about, and a few have stands set up to sell items, but I don't have any money. Guards stand by the town's exits, but do nothing to prevent my departure, so I point the Drifter east.

My exploring leads me to a flooded area where I rely on the Drifter's blink ability to move above the water between platforms. It doesn't take long to develop a rhythm and speed allowing me to navigate the terrain quickly. What appears to be a man near the area's entrance shows me an image of a large intimidating frog creature, which is then marked on my map as a destination.

I pass a sword the size of a building collecting moss and foliage from presumed years of abandonment. My first thought is this weapon must have belonged to the titans I saw earlier, but it's just part of the environment. There's no indicator of its history outside of my own assumptions. Whatever the case may be, it was clearly dropped on the bridge that leads to my destination, so I have to find a way around. I discover a temple nearby, and inside a number of white-tailed creatures take refuge. One shows me a series of images of their people getting sick and dying – at least that's how I interpret it. It can't be a coincidence that my Drifter also has an illness...

» PLATFORM
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Heart Machine

» DEVELOPER
Heart Machine

» RELEASE
Spring



After exploring the wider area, tracking down keys to open locked doors, taking on new enemies as well as the goblins I've now developed a strategy for, I collect four encased diamond-like objects. These allow me to make my way to the area initially marked on my map to meet a frog boss.

The frog wastes no time on an introduction and immediately starts throwing explosive bottles at me. I can stun him by causing strange plants to detonate under his feet. I retry the fight many times, and finally eliminate the boss. The Drifter has one more bout with his sickness, reminding me of his delicate situation. I then head back to the village to purchase upgrades for my blink ability, as well as a move allowing me to take out multiple enemies in one quick stylish slice.

This is just the first of four areas surrounding the central town hub. North is my next destination. Snowy mountains greet me along with another character who shows me a new boss and marks their location on my map. This one looks more human than animal, but I won't know more until I meet it in person. As I make way up the mountains, a new flying enemy that requires careful timing to hit gives me trouble. I preserve and soon find a locked door at the mountain peak, forcing me to head back down the mountain along a new path.

As I take my first steps in the new direction, the soundtrack (from Disasterpeace of Fez and It Follows fame) swells and the camera pans to show a gigantic dead titan. His arm grips the side of the mountain as though it died while attempting the climb. The creature, or perhaps robot, is the size of a skyscraper

compared to the Drifter. I carefully walk up to the titan and stand on its hand, which offers me a view of the nearby landscape as well as a better look at the full titan. Seeing more of the creature fills me with a surprising sense of dread. I don't know what these titans are or why they seem to have collapsed without warning, but I am intrigued and eager to learn more about the Drifter's mysterious, imposing world.

MAKING THE MYSTERY

"I'm sure every kid has their dream game they want to make. Or they have ideas about games they want to make. This is one of those that stuck around," Preston says when

asked about the Hyper Light Drifter's origins. The game has been in development in some capacity between Preston and engineer and designer Beau Blyth since 2011, but became a full-time project after launching a successful Kickstarter in 2013.

The game raised over \$600,000 despite no one on its team having any particular notable video game development experience and its pitch video (much like the game itself) featuring no voices or explanations of goals. Instead, the video just showed a prototype of the game in action. "I think our video was really good," Blyth says. "Just showing the game. Not us pleading, 'Please help us make this!' We were just like, 'This is what it is.'"

THE LESSONS OF ZELDA

A common point of reference for Hyper Light Drifter is the Legend of Zelda. It's a game Heart Machine called out in its Kickstarter pitch and one you will inevitably think about while playing the game. Preston, however, uses Nintendo's classic series for more than just what it does right. "Even the bad Zelda stuff taught me about things I don't want to do," says Hyperlight Drifter creator Alex Preston.

Hyper Light Drifter has an overhead perspective, sword combat, and abundant points of discovery, but you won't find puzzles (a Zelda mainstay) in the traditional sense. Both Preston and Blyth agree the game is more inspired by the concept of Zelda than Zelda itself, calling out the complete lack of hand-holding and allure of discovery from the original 1985 game as a big design motivator. "Skyward Sword was a rigid pile of misery," Preston jokes, lamenting the continuous backtracking and excessive tutorials.

Preston likes Zelda. "I might not sound like it right now, but I do," he assures. "Ocarina is still one of my favorite games of all time and I can still go back and play it, but the things I take from it are both the negative and positive. I feel very strongly about it because I embrace it so much and it was such a formative experience," Preston says. "I'm very critical of it because of the way it has informed me over the years."



Hyper Light Drifter is a science-fiction game that avoids the supernatural. Technology pervades the landscape with abandoned machinery dotting each environment, and enemies use guns and weapons, despite their fantastic character design. “Everything we put into the game is grounded in some scientific fact, or scientific fiction that we’re interested in. Nothing in there is like, ‘Yeah, he just squirts a beam out because he is a magical bird!’ even though it might seem like it.”

Its pixelated art style is common in the indie world. “Really any art style – and it is an art style ultimately – or aesthetic has a challenge,” Preston says. “I don’t think there is any less of a challenge with pixel art than there is with high-res or 3D stuff if you want to make it look good and make it your own.”

One of the ways Hyper Light Drifter stands out aesthetically from similar games is in part thanks to the history of the game’s artists, and its non-video game inspirations. “There are a lot of bad-looking pixel art games out there, and I hope ours is not,” Preston says. He, as well as the other artists

on the team, trained as traditional artists, and taught themselves pixel art through the course of development. Preston also points to the films of Studio Ghibli. “*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is the biggest one for me,” Preston says. “Aesthetically, it is very grand and touching in a way, and it resonated with me forever.” The inspiration is clear in the game, as its mysterious world is one that clearly has a strained relationship with abandoned technology.

Through the course of our discussion, Heart Machine emphasized the importance of secrets and discovery in Hyper Light Drifter. The desire for mystery influences every aspect of the game, perhaps most prominently in its insistence on avoiding text and dialogue. “Writing can kind of destroy the mystery, which we have a lot of,” Blyth says. “You don’t want to just say everything.” Preston goes so far as to call the process of explaining a story and gameplay mechanics without text as miserable. “We’re not allowed to be lazy,” Blyth says, “It’s been a challenge and it’s better for it.”

HYPER LIGHT DRIFTERS LIST OF DON'TS

Early in development, Heart Machine’s small development team sat at a table and wrote out a list of things it hated in video games that it wanted to make sure didn’t make it into the final product. This isn’t the full list, but some of the stand-outs:

- Block puzzles
- Numbers
- Zombies
- Teleporting enemies
- Poison
- Small, difficult to hit enemies born from one large enemy
- Long repetitive backtracking
- Confirmation messages
- Grinding

Heart Machine realizes that upon release, Hyper Light’s figurative silence might be a point of contention for players, but it trusts its audience, and hopes a community will build around the game to solve its mysteries and intentionally ambiguous mechanics. “It has to be an expectation of any game maker these days – the Internet exists,” Preston says. Even though Hyper Light Drifter looks like a classic game, it was a game funded on the promise of its future as opposed to the history of its creators. After spending time with the game, it’s safe to say Heart Machine’s trust is founded. \



These giant monoliths, like this one seen in the north, hide electronics and computer technology once activated

A detailed illustration of Ryu from the Street Fighter series. He is shown from the chest up, wearing his signature red headband and red boxing gloves. His expression is intense and focused. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey. A large, bold red brushstroke runs diagonally across the lower half of the image, serving as a backdrop for the title and sub-header.

» **PLATFORM**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **STYLE**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **PUBLISHER**
Capcom

» **DEVELOPER**
Capcom, Dimps

» **RELEASE**
February 16

THE NEW WORLD WARRIORS

STREET FIGHTER V'S FAMILIAR CAST IS MORE DIFFERENT THAN YOU THINK

Iconic characters like Ryu, Ken, and Chun-Li are the faces of Street Fighter, but the series has always included a diverse cast of outlandish characters. We spoke with producer Yoshinori Ono about the process of crafting the combatants and making familiar faces feel fresh again for the newest entry in the legendary fighting series.

BY BRIAN SHEA

HERE COME SOME NEW CHALLENGERS

The way a fighting game plays is of utmost importance, but with hardcore players pouring thousands of hours into gaining an intimate familiarity with their favorite characters, the roster carries undeniable weight. This makes implementing a well-rounded cast of fighters essential. The Street Fighter series excels at this, consistently delivering games full of characters with diverse abilities, looks, and personalities.

This is largely thanks to Street Fighter's ability to introduce compelling new combatants regularly. Though the classic fighters will always receive more love and attention from the fanbase, the new challengers breathe fresh life into the franchise.

According to Ono, the process of introducing a new character can be a difficult and stressful one, with fears that the new faces won't fit in with the rest of the roster, or that they'll feel wrong for the game. However, the team has a long pedigree of successful over-the-top characters to fall back on, which galvanizes the team when brainstorming new ideas.

"We could be scared of new and different things, but at Street Fighter we have kind of a tradition of having really outlandish characters suddenly appear," he says. "That's actually something that we go for because those are most of the characters that really end up sticking with people and they end up falling in love with. In the long run, those are the characters that end up having a lot of longevity and more of a chance of sticking around in the series."

Street Fighter is popular all across the globe, and the team often looks at underrepresented regions when creating a new character. From there, the characters are crafted to ensure they have significance in the story. The example Ono gives is the Korean character Juri, who made her introduction in Super Street Fighter IV. Juri is the first Korean character to appear in the series, and the intention was to represent the many fighting game fans in Korea through this character.

In Street Fighter V, the team approached the new characters with these same ideas. Each of the four new characters – Necalli, Rashid, Laura, and F.A.N.G – were created to appeal to the worldwide player base either through their origin or new fighting style. Necalli and F.A.N.G's origins are unknown, but each of them uses a unique fighting style. Laura is the first character to employ Brazilian jiu-jitsu tactics, while Rashid is an acrobatic character who also happens to be the first in the main series to hail from the Middle East.

FAMILIAR FOES WITH NEW TWISTS

New characters can inject a feeling of freshness to a fighting game, but it wouldn't feel like Street Fighter without the franchise mainstays. With Street Fighter V, several fan favorites are represented, including Ryu, Chun-Li, Ken, M. Bison (Dictator), and Cammy. These names are familiar to longtime players, but Capcom and Dimps worked to make the experience of controlling some of those fighters different from past games.

"We have characters coming back like Chun-Li, Ken, and even Cammy changed some, but we made sure to have at least one thing – I told the team I want one thing that they change on,

purpose for these characters," Ono says. "I wanted them to go out of their way to make sure they did that."

For example, Vega (Claw) is still an acrobatic, aerial assault-style character, but his inputs have been switched up to play more into his style. Dhalsim has also received some big changes including a revamp of his iconic Yoga Fire move, while Zangief has been given new throws to help him restrict his opponents even more than before.

Even with the notion of intentionally changing up legacy characters, Ono paid close attention to the process to ensure that the DNA of these characters remained intact in a way that was recognizable to the passionate fan base. "The way that the character attacks, the way that you play with them, the DNA of the character – I made sure to tell them to keep that 100-percent intact," he says. "Even though the characters may have changed, they still have stuff that you're used to. If you look at Ken, we made sure to keep his attacks and made sure that he has a playstyle where he's constantly attacking and rushing down the opponent. Or with Chun-Li where she has a lot of kick moves, but also capable in air-to-air combat sort of situations. It's how we're resetting and how we're having people approach it a little bit differently."

Because of where the story falls in the series' timeline, Street Fighter IV's original roster relied heavily on the characters appearing in Street Fighter II. Appearing later on the timeline, Street Fighter V's launch stable pulls from a more diverse pool. Several characters from Street Fighter II's roster appear, but Street Fighter V's roster also pulls in multiple fighters who made their debuts in the Alpha trilogy, as well as Birdie, who appeared in the original Street Fighter, but skipped the Street Fighter II series.

THE BALANCING ACT

Once the characters are implemented into the roster, they must be balanced to play well. Having an overpowered character is problematic as online matches become flooded with that character and players who spam his or her most effective moves.

Part of this balancing act is having characters that are accessible through movesets that are easier to input, but those characters also have drawbacks in other areas. In that regard, the team must be careful as to not nuke a character's abilities too much. If a character is

too weak compared to the other fighters, that character won't get used, or players will become so frustrated that they'll stop playing the game altogether.

"No character has value as a combat tool if he or she is too strong or too weak. Except maybe Dan [laughs]," Ono says. "When balancing characters, we don't think to ourselves, 'This character is powerful in the story, so let's balance him to be super powerful.'"

An example he gives is Sagat in vanilla Street Fighter IV. The massive "Emperor of Muay Thai" was perhaps the most powerful character in the game, but fans seemed to be more forgiving of that fact due to his standing as a formidable character in the story. Sagat was eventually balanced out to be fairer for competition.

When Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition launched in 2010, Yun was viewed as overpowered. Though he wasn't as overpowered as Sagat in the original Street Fighter IV, the player feedback was louder than it was with Sagat. "I suspect the criticism of Yun was so much higher than on some subconscious level, people were thinking, 'Sagat's the Emperor of Muay Thai – of course he's powerful. But Yun's just some young punk,'" Ono says.

Shortly after these criticisms surfaced, the team released a balance update that addressed the issues. Going forward, Ono says that the team has kept these lessons in their minds while working on Street Fighter V. "We want to ensure that we don't have another situation like we did with Sagat and Yun, so we're working really hard to provide a very balanced game with SFV," he says.

Listening to player feedback has proven crucial to the team, which is why Capcom and Dimps have been getting Street Fighter V in the hands of as many players as possible prior to launch through expos and beta tests. "We have always poised ourselves to listen to everyone's feedback," Ono says. "That stance has not changed with SFV, where we've been continuously conducting beta tests and collecting user feedback."

"Unfortunately, we can't listen to each and every user's opinion. One user might say we should make shoryukens stronger. Another will say we should make shoryukens weaker. It's impossible to honor both of these requests at the same time. But, we always read player feedback, then make the appropriate decisions to the best of our ability."

EXPANDING THE ROSTER

More returning characters are coming to Street Fighter V's roster by way of downloadable content. The decision was made that players will never need to buy a new disc-based product or upgrade pack in order to avoid using Street Fighter IV's disc-based update methods.

"We're trying to match users' lifestyles and where the culture is heading," says series producer Yoshinori Ono. "That's what we're really trying to accomplish with the service model approach."

When the characters release, players have the option to earn characters in-game rather than buy them through accomplishing certain goals. So far, Capcom has revealed Balrog (Boxer), Guile, Alex, Ibuki, Urien, and Juri.

CRAFTING THE COMBATANTS

With 16 playable characters at launch, Street Fighter V features a good mix of classic characters and new challengers. We asked Ono to explain how he and the team designed each of Street Fighter V's launch characters.

RYU

"When it comes to his visual design, the gi, headband, and gloves are indispensable. Of course, we did try more drastic redesigns, but it starts to miss the point when you go so far that someone seeing it for the first time doesn't even recognize the character as Ryu. So, while we did make little tweaks here and there like giving more weight and thickness to his gi and upgrading the graphics, we decided to stick with his existing design. Ryu's evolution has been more internal."



CHUN-LI

"She was the first character we created, alongside Ryu (of course we've been continually adjusting them both throughout the development process). Chun-Li is a character who's changed quite a bit from one installment to the next, but I think we've always preserved the fact that she's a speedy character who inflicts lots of hits. We kept that in mind for this installment when creating her moves and systems."



DHALSIM

"As with past titles, Dhalsim has been tricky to balance. He either ends up ridiculously strong, or ridiculously weak. After lots of trial and error, we made it so his Yoga Fire launches in a parabolic arc. For a horizontal approach, he's got his fierce punch and roundhouse. His fighting style entails attacking while simultaneously distracting the opponent with Yoga Fires from above. From the opponent's standpoint, Dhalsim moves at an easily observable speed, so you just have to stay calm and his tricks can be overcome. Aside from the big change mentioned above, we've made plenty of little tweaks and I think achieved just the right balance."



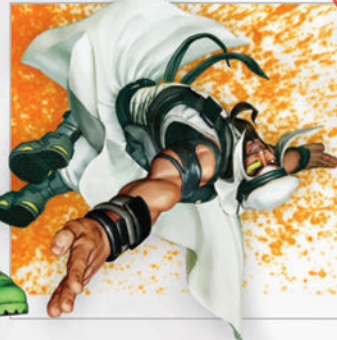
NASH

"What we originally envisioned for Nash (in SFV) was a killer, hell-bent on revenge... a cold assassin with no memories other than those of his own death. His critical art, sonic move, and other moves were designed with the above concept in mind, and we never strayed from that."



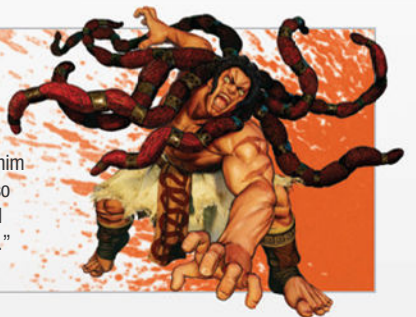
RASHID

"With Rashid, we were going for a character who would provide contrast with Ryu. He is loose and lax in general, but buckles down when the time comes to get serious. He's also a child of the modern age, and has a penchant for all the latest gadgets."



NECALLI

"The original concept was a shocking character who craved battle with mighty opponents, and who would actually eat those he defeated. It eventually occurred to us that a flesh-eating character might not be suitable for a Teen-rated game, so we changed him into a devourer of souls. To give him an animal-like quality, we designed his hair to resemble snakes or octopus tentacles. It's also reflected in his battle style, where he attacks with his claws and intimidates the opponent with roars. He's an incredibly untamed character. We wanted to use the beautiful culture of South America as groundwork and sculpt it into some kind of a human form."



M. BISON (DICTATOR)

"For SFV, we've updated his animations to preserve that 'boss-like' quality. You'll notice he has a very imposing walk with his arms crossed. Application of his normal Psycho Crusher overlapped with that of the Double Knee Press – predominantly used for chip damage on wakeup, which wasn't very 'boss-like' at all, so we got rid of it."



VEGA (CLAW)

"The core concept for Vega was to do away with the tendency to just spam crouching medium punch at the mid to long range. We also envisioned him as an aerial combat specialist. We didn't think charge commands were a great fit for aerial special moves, so we changed his inputs. We also wanted to create more disparity in his attack style depending on whether or not he has the claw equipped."



CAMMY

"Cammy was originally envisioned to be an extreme in-fighter. Thanks to her thrusting attack after activating V-Trigger, we've made her into a character who can deal huge damage in a short amount of time. We've also changed her aerial mobility by way of the Cannon Strike and EX Cannon Strike so that she's more capable of unleashing surprise attacks."



KARIN

"No matter what we do, Rekka moves always end up being powerful (dive-kicks, too). We've made them only available with the V-Trigger active, creating a sort of ebb and flow to her offense. We'd intended for Karin to be a technical character from the very beginning. She's a popular character that garners a lot of interest, but she requires some practice to master."



BIRDIE

"From a design standpoint, his chain was always what stood out about him, so we felt we should increase the number of attacks that use it. We've added moves that prioritize moving the opponent over Birdie's own mobility, making him come off as more of a reactive character. But in actuality, his V-Skill also makes him adept at offensive maneuvers."



KEN

"We wanted to turn Ken into a character completely distinct from Ryu. His initial design had him in a modified gi. There are even design drafts out there depicting him in a suit, but he is a fighter, first and foremost, so we decided to stick with the gi but evolve it. Ken is a clever, skillful type, so he's able to absorb new influences from a variety of sources, such as taking on new training. We equipped him with some new training wear and a fighting style that puts a unique twist on Gouken's teachings."



F.A.N.G

"We were going for a character with a deceptive, dirty fighting style. It was decided in the very beginning that he would possess reach second only to Dhalsim. We toyed with the idea of having him use some kind of concealed weapon, but we needed to keep him distinct from Vega, so we ended up going with the poison concept. F.A.N.G is also integral to the game's story."



R. MIKA

"We focused on trying to make her feel more like a pro wrestler. Street Fighter V has more characters categorized as grapplers than previous entries, but we aimed to give each one their own distinct style. For Mika, we created lots of different ways for her to set up throw opportunities."



LAURA

"We received a request from our South American team to craft a new Brazilian fighter. Around that time, we had also decided that one of the new characters would be a woman. For Laura, we'd wanted to create a fighting style consisting of a combination of linking moves and striking moves, so Brazilian jiu-jitsu made for a good fit, given the character's nationality. She boasts good forward and backward mobility, and close observers will note that she employs suri-ashi (feet shuffling)."



ZANGIEF

"Our first thought was to get rid of Banishing Flat. The concept in SFV takes it back to the original Street Fighter II, where it was all about seeking powerful throw opportunities. In light of that, we've implemented some new ways for Zangief to get in close and endure opponents' attacks. By implementing an aerial anti-air throw, we've made Zangief more able to restrict opponents' movements (and make them very aware of that)."





GET TO KNOW THE PROS

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ASSOCIATE SPOTLIGHT

Michaeline / AK

What is your all-time favorite game and why?

I would have to say my most favorite game series is the Mass Effect trilogy. It is a fantastic blend of a 3rd person shooter and an RPG, which are genres I really enjoy. I absolutely love the characters and the interactions the game creates with those characters. The ability to create your own hero and choose how they interact with the game's environment is the coolest thing ever. Every time a customer is looking for a great series I almost always recommend Mass Effect.

What impact on gaming do you see Virtual Reality having?

Virtual reality is going to make playing games a lot easier and also allow for different ways to be able to play a game.

In your opinion, what role will indie games play in the future?

Indie games offer a unique, memorable, and fun gaming experience for everyone, there are so many cool ones out there, my favorites are Don't Starve and Braid. I believe indie games will be around in the future.

Are you a collector?

I collect POP! Vinyl figures, amiibos, Magic The Gathering trading cards, and other random plushes and figurines. The biggest things in my collection are the collector's editions of all three Mass Effect games, My Halo 3 and Halo 5 collector's edition, and my 21inch statue of Garrus from Mass Effect.

Hugo Rodriguez / AK

What is your all-time favorite game and why?

My all-time favorite video game has to be The Last of Us from Naughty Dog. It has been so much fun diving into those worlds and instantly loving all the characters. When I started playing The Last of Us, I was surprised to immediately love the characters and how they developed over time in a post-apocalyptic world. To this day, I haven't felt that same adrenaline rush in any other game.

What new game are you most excited for and why?

I'm looking forward to King of Fighters 14 and Street Fighter 5.

What's in your console right now?

Right now, there's Destiny in my Destiny themed PS4. There's Splatoon in my Wii U, there's The Witcher 3 in my Xbox One, Dragons Crown in my PS Vita, and Fire Emblem: Awakening for my Nintendo 3DS.

Which Virtual Reality device are you most excited for?

Definitely the Oculus Rift. It sounds like it'll be very versatile. I haven't had a chance to try it though.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

THE HOTTEST STUFF

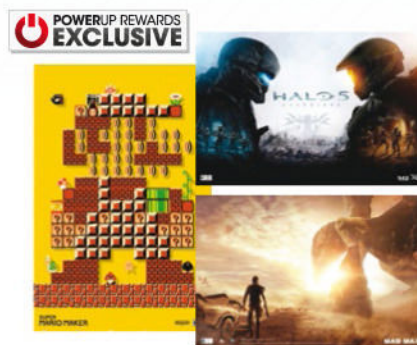
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With 2016 in full swing, we outline the best games coming to consoles and computers over the first half of the year

The GAMES of Spring

By GAME INFORMER STAFF

Not so long ago, almost all the best games in any given year would launch just before the holidays, only to be followed by a long drought. While the final months of each year are still flooded with great games, in recent years some publishers have steered clear of the holiday deluge and moved the release of some compelling games into the first half of the following year. Following this trend, 2016 is no exception to the new paradigm. Here are some of the most exciting games on the way to your screen as the winter winds to a close and spring gets set to arrive.

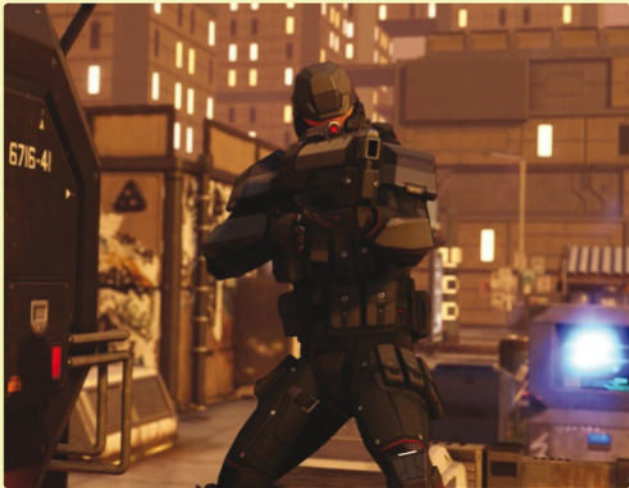




The Walking Dead: Michonne

February 9 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC • Mac • Vita • iOS

Telltale returns to the popular Walking Dead license with this three-episode miniseries starring the sword-wielding Michonne. The story is set during a previously unexplored period in the comics, and has Michonne confronting threats in the present while struggling with her past. With no concrete info about the series' third season yet, this adventure helps The Walking Dead fans get their fix.



XCOM 2

February 5 • PC • Mac

Nearly 20 years after the alien invasion, players command a rebel force bent on undermining Earth's new overlords at every turn. From a mobile base, players deploy squads of agents, ambush a host of deadly aliens, and research new weapons and talents that include everything from sniper rifles to psychic operatives. True to its pedigree, XCOM 2 looks to offer a series of deep strategic battles that will test your critical thinking as well as your determination. Signing up for this war is practically suicide, but what else would you expect from XCOM?

The Flame In The Flood

February 9 • Xbox One • PC

The Molasses Flood developers have quite the resume, with games like BioShock and Halo 2. This is not a science-fiction shooter tale, however, as it follows a character named Scout and her dog Aesop as they try to survive while traveling down a river, exploring the surroundings, and collecting supplies as permadeath looms around every corner.



Assassin's Creed Chronicles: Russia

February 9 • PS4 • Xbox One • Vita • PC

The final installment of this Mark of the Ninja-inspired spin-off of Assassin's Creed is coming this February, with Chronicles: Russia letting players step into the boots of assassin Nikolai Orelov. Nikolai's story about completing one last mission for The Brotherhood before leaving the order to start a new life with his family could prove to be one of the most interesting tales to emerge from the series.





Dying Light – The Following

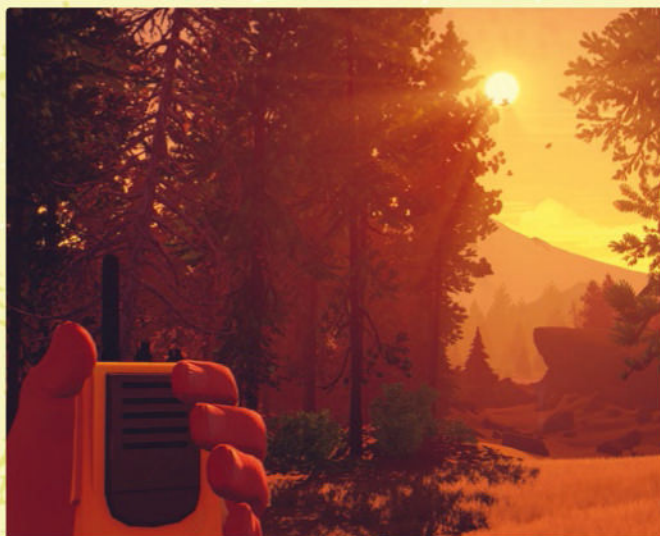
February 9 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Techland's first-person, open-world zombie adventure is getting a huge expansion. The vast, zombie-riddled countryside of The Following DLC is larger than all of the core game's land combined, leaving players with fewer means of vertical safety. Thankfully players have a buggy that can be customized with flamethrowers, electric blasts, and other wonderful toys via its unique skill tree.

Mighty No. 9

February 9 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · Wii U · PS3 · Xbox 360 · Vita · 3DS · PC

Mega Man co-creator Keiji Inafune is hard at work with his team at Comcept and side-scrolling veterans Inti Creates on a spiritual successor to Capcom's M.I.A. Blue Bomber. The 2.5D action-platformer features everything we love from the NES-era classics: elemental bosses with weapons you can steal and turn on them, demanding difficulty, and an adorably cartoony art style.



Firewatch

February 9 🎮 PS4 · PC

Campo Santo's debut game puts you in the shoes of Henry, a troubled man who takes a job as a fire lookout to gain some perspective. Henry's only form of communication is through walkie talkie to his supervisor, Delilah. Together they deal with everything from drunken kids to suspicious figures, getting to know each other and growing through the experience. Your job? Explore and make choices.





Unravel

February 9 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Look out, woolly Yoshi – there's a new yarn-based protagonist in town. Yarny stole the stage at EA's E3 2015 press conference, thanks to Unravel's clever mix of traditional platforming and physics-based puzzles. Yarny uses his own string to lasso, swing, and slingshot his way through gorgeous environments, while simultaneously weaving a deeper symbolic narrative about the bonds between people.



Pillars Of Eternity: The White March Part 2

February 16 🎮 PC

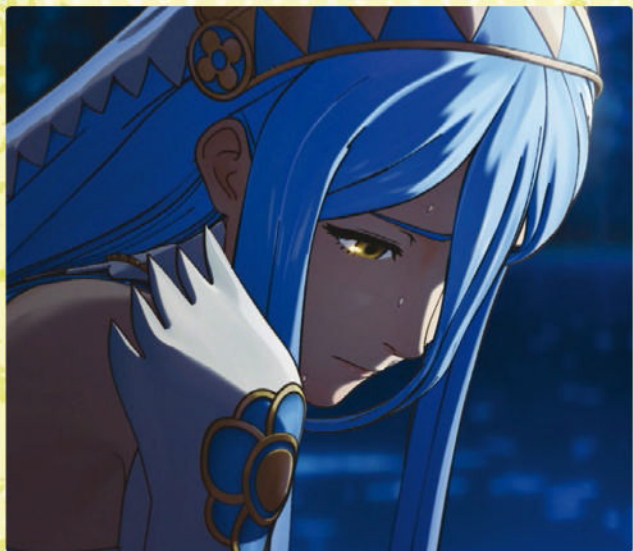
If you missed out on one of the best RPGs of 2015, now is your chance to catch up. The second and final part of The White March expansion releases in February, so you can now embrace the full scope of the epic adventure. A new barbarian companion and a higher level cap should appeal to veteran players, but we're especially curious about the new "story time" mode, which gives players tools to confront the narrative at a faster pace.



Street Fighter V

February 16 🎮 PS4 · PC

With the next entry in the lauded fighting franchise, Capcom and Dimps are introducing a flurry of new ideas, including cross-platform online play, DLC characters you can choose to either pay for with real-life money or earn in-game, and V-Skills, V-Reversals, and V-Triggers to spice up the combat. Street Fighter V delivers 16 playable characters at launch, which you can read all about on p. 52.



Fire Emblem Fates

February 19 🎮 3DS

Fire Emblem Awakening proved this long-running strategy/RPG series still had plenty of new ideas. The next entry is going even bigger, releasing two different versions: Conquest and Birthright. Each version focuses on the same characters, but puts you on different sides of the war, either Kingdoms of Hoshida (where you were born) or Nohr (your adopted home). Which will you choose?

Plants Vs. Zombies Garden Warfare 2

February 23 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

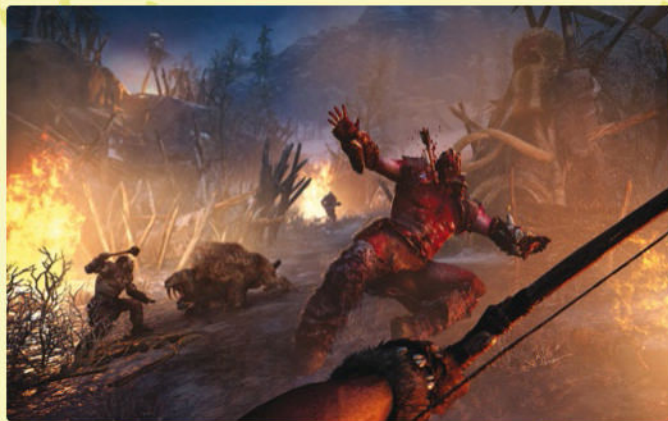
Some players might not be able to see their lawns in February thanks to snow, but that won't stop them from being able to defend them. PopCap's shooter spinoff is coming back, with new character classes and maps, including a low-gravity moon base. The plants are taking the fight to the zombies, and players can gain an edge by grabbing a split-screen partner or transplanting heroes from the first Garden Warfare.

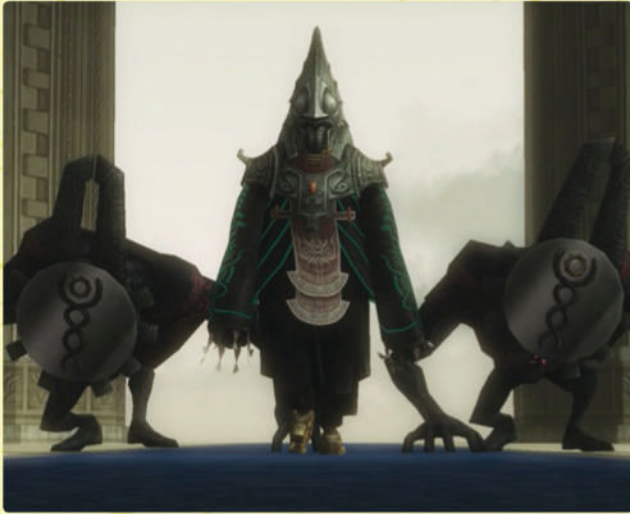


Far Cry Primal

February 23 (PS4, Xbox One), March 1 (PC) 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

The Far Cry series has always placed a premium on hunting down (and in most cases being hunted by) the local wildlife, but Far Cry Primal takes things a step further. Set in the Mesolithic period, Far Cry Primal trades in modern-day firepower for spears, clubs, and bows. The good news? You can now tame the deadly animals to fight by your side as you build up and manage your own prehistoric tribe.





The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess HD

March 4 🎮 Wii U

Twilight Princess is the next classic Zelda title to be revisited on a new platform, and it's coming with more than just a high-definition visual overhaul. The game features Amiibo functionality and releases alongside a Wolf Link figure, which Nintendo says carries data over to the brand new Zelda scheduled to release later in 2016.

Hitman

March 11 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

IO Interactive threw Hitman fans for a loop when it announced the newest installment of the series would be released in stages, but aside from the episodic format, everything about Agent 47's latest assassination spree sounds on target. Greatly expanded locations, more creative kill options, and hundreds of unique non-player characters in each level aim to deliver 47's greatest adventure yet.



The Division

March 8 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

From the moment Ubisoft debuted a moody, scripted demo of The Division at E3 2013, gamers have been curious about this online multiplayer shooter. Like Destiny before it, this third-person shooter seamlessly blends single-player content, cooperative experiences, and competitive multiplayer into one persistent world. Merging a post-apocalyptic Tom Clancy clandestine military scenario with RPG upgrade systems and loot drops sounds promising, but the game still has several unknowns at this point. To read more, check out our preview on p. 68.



UFC 2

March 15 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One

Two years after a solid debut effort, EA Sports is stepping back in the Octagon with UFC 2. With new grappling and submission mechanics, as well as improved knockout physics, EA Sports hopes to make the action more authentic than ever before. EA is also promising the biggest roster ever seen in a fight sport game, as well as more depth in the modes offered. Read more on p. 71.



Pokkén Tournament

March 18 ✨ Wii U

The Pokémon series has traditionally been about two characters squaring off in combat, so bringing gameplay from the Tekken series to create a Pokémon fighting game should be a match made in heaven. With a roster comprised of iconic Pokémon like Pikachu, Charizard, and Mewtwo and more accessible gameplay than Tekken's usual offerings, Pokkén Tournament could be a great addition to the Wii U's catalog.

Adr1ft

March 28 (PC), TBA (PS4, Xbox One) ✨ PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Adr1ft has you exploring the wreckage and beauty of space. As an amnesiac astronaut whose ship has crashed, you float in zero gravity searching to find answers and oxygen tanks before you run out of breath. Along the way, you discover the lives of crew members; their stories offer both beautiful and tragic revelations about life.



MLB The Show 16

March 29 ✨ PS4 · PS3

You often hear athletes say that it felt like time slowed to a crawl when they made a remarkable play. Using a new feature called ShowTime, Sony's annual baseball franchise is homing in on this aspect of the game, allowing players more time to make diving stops, or crack a game-winning home run. Road to the Show mode is updated with new unlockable perks and a streamlined menu system that allows players to play an entire series without returning to the main menu.



Dirt Rally

April 5 ✨ PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Dirt Rally was the best racing title last year due to its relentless challenge and the car handling rising to the occasion. Now console/PC retail owners will get to experience the game in all its frenzied glory. It's been updated since its Steam release, and at the time of this writing Codemasters hasn't released any details, but we expect those courses/cars to be included in this release.



Quantum Break

April 5 🎮 Xbox One

Remedy Entertainment doesn't shy away from complicated stories, and Quantum Break's time-traveling narrative is more involved than traditional games thanks to a live-action television-inspired show, which will break up the action and fill in some narrative gaps. Players control Jack Joyce, the bystander of a failed time travel experiment who gains extraordinary time-manipulation powers and must then use them to stop an evil corporation from destroying time completely.



Dark Souls III

April 12 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Hidetaka Miyazaki returns to the Dark Souls series for the third entry in the dark fantasy world. What we've seen so far feels a lot like the original title in the series, with challenging bosses, surprising shortcuts, and plenty of player freedom and choice as they determine how to tackle the punishing but beautiful world. With a few new features and mechanics being added to the core gameplay, we're expecting another powerful entry for the fantastic franchise.



Ratchet & Clank

April 12 🎮 PS4

This reimagining of the first game in the classic sci-fi platformer series is also an adaptation of the full feature film being released almost three weeks after the game. Looking like a gorgeous, playable Pixar cartoon, the reboot maintains the trademark, wacky humor of the original, with weaponry capable of turning the eponymous duo's foes into helpless, bouncing pixelated versions of themselves.



Bravely Second: End Layer

APRIL 15 🌟 3DS

Bravely Default was one of the most talked about role-playing games of 2012, delivering a great blend of nostalgia and innovation. Its sequel, Bravely Second, takes place two years later and is poised to be even better. Square Enix is out to right the first game's wrongs, such as the repetitive content. Expect returning characters, new jobs and abilities, and more of its fantastic battle system.

Star Fox Zero

APRIL 21 🌟 Wii U

With Star Fox Zero, Nintendo aims to recapture the magic of Star Fox 64 while modernizing the formula at every turn. Using the screen on the Wii U GamePad, players can get better views of the action and aim more precisely. You also have control of a fresh stable of vehicles that add various new mechanics into the mix, including a slow hovering vehicle designed specifically for stealth.



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

APRIL 26 🌟 PS4

No one nails jaw-dropping set-piece encounters quite like Naughty Dog, and early demos have offered ample evidence of the explosive action in Nathan Drake's new adventure. Stellar visuals, harrowing traversal and shooting gameplay, pithy dialogue, and a robust new multiplayer mode should make this the defining exclusive for Sony in the first half of 2016.



Total War: Warhammer

APRIL 28 🌟 PC

The Total War titles have always provided plenty of settlement claiming and large-scale battles that are breathtaking to behold, but Creative Assembly is finally taking things far away from the historically driven series by exploring the fantasy world of Warhammer. Things that would never fly in ancient Rome, like magic and ogres, take center stage in this new look on massive battles. Check out more on p. 82.



Battleborn

May 3 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Best known for the Borderlands series, Gearbox is combining its knack for first-person action with a huge cast of colorful characters vying for control of the last star in the universe. Players square off against each other in team-based battles as a high-flying elf huntress armed with a bow, a gentlemen robo-sniper, and myriad other galactic misfits. A four-player co-op campaign rounds out the gonzo sci-fi package.



Homefront: The Revolution

May 17 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

After a tumultuous development that includes switching publishers and dev studios a couple times, in May the revolution will finally begin. This first-person shooter bears the Homefront name, but has transformed into a new experience thanks to the new open-world setting. Taking place four years after the Greater Korean Republic's invasion of America, a small band of Philadelphia resistance fighters must scavenge for supplies and slowly chip away at the invaders' power structure using hit-and-fade tactics.



Mirror's Edge Catalyst

May 24 🎮 PS4 · Xbox One · PC

Fans have waited a long time for a new outing with Faith, the free-running heroine of the city of Glass. Catalyst is a prequel story about her early days of climbing and leaping along rooftops. DICE is implementing an open-world structure, along with a refined approach to traversal and martial arts takedowns, but the core parkour action remains the centerpiece. 🎮



The Division

Taking Tom Clancy in a new direction

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Massive Entertainment/
Red Storm

» **Release**
March 3

If there's one thing we can take away from the first couple years of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One era, it's that major publishers are more risk averse than ever before. Given the giant expenditures required to make and market blockbuster games, fewer seem willing to bet on new ideas, as evidenced by the smaller number of new game properties coming out of the Electronic Arts (Titanfall), Activision (Destiny), and Take-Two (Evolve, Battleborn) camps. Ubisoft, however, is swimming against that tide with Watch Dogs, For Honor, and The Division. The latter is by far the biggest gamble, with the potential for the biggest payoff.

Since its debut in 2013, we've had more questions than answers about this ambitious attempt to blend single-player campaigns, cooperative experiences, and competitive play into one harmonious package. But now that The Division is rounding into shape, Ubisoft stopped by to give us a hands-on tour

of how all of these pieces coalesce.

Unlike Destiny, the only other game to date that has set up shop in this new shooter space, The Division didn't forget its narrative. From the opening cinematic to the completion of your objectives as one of the civilian operatives hoping to restore order to New York City after it's hit with a catastrophic epidemic, The Division keeps its story moving forward. Players explore where this virus came from and if it has a potential antidote while meeting a colorful cast of characters. From the crazy-eyed convict leading the prisoners who escaped from Rikers to the former waste management servicemen hell bent on burning the sickness out of the city and killing everyone who stands in their way, you get a clear sense of Manhattan's new fractured reality.

Before they set out on the mission to take back New York City, Tom Clancy fans must take a leap of faith with developer Massive Entertainment. The

rule of thumb for decades of Rainbow Six and Ghost Recon games has been deadly gunplay; if you shoot someone in the head, they die in a timely fashion. Not in The Division. Cleaving more closely to a traditional role-playing game or the fantastical firefights of games like Borderlands and Destiny, enemies in The Division are bullet sponges. Some go down with less resistance, but others are heavily armed and require concentrated fire to neutralize. This requires considerable suspension of disbelief when the enemy shooting at you is a garbage man from the Bronx instead of an alien or supernatural being.

When I ask Massive lead game designer Mathias Karlson why they are straying from the Clancy roots in this fashion, he explains. "If I decide to work really hard to be a team member that forgoes my medical and healing capabilities to go for damage, how does that work if it doesn't matter because whatever I do it's one shot



one kill?" he asks. "At the end of the day, we are an RPG first, so that's why we did what we did."

Karlson isn't lying; after playing the game for several hours it's clear that role-playing is the true heart of *The Division*. One of your first jobs in the game is to establish a base of operation. Like the headquarters in *XCOM*, the players have several ways they can upgrade their base, which in turn grants upgrades to your character. By completing missions throughout the city you can strengthen the medical, technical, and security functionality. Doing so levels up your character and grants you access to a bevy of new skills, talents, and perks. Since *The Division* is a class-less experience, you can swap out skills on the fly as you see fit. This allows your fire squad of up to four people to reconfigure as each situation dictates.

While exploring the now desolate streets of New York, brave players can venture into the dangerous streets of the Dark Zone. This free-for-all space is where you can scavenge for epic loot, but getting it out of the region may prove difficult.

The *Division* has no competitive multiplayer modes. Instead, the Dark Zone

is a winner-take-all area with its own ranking system. How high your rank is determines which loot crates you can open, and as you move north in the region the A.I. enemies get progressively harder. Once you find your fill of loot, you must try to extract it to your base for decontamination before using it. Here your job gets tricky because players can go rogue, killing other operatives and keeping their hard-earned spoils for themselves. Time will tell if players will embrace this type of experience, but it's certainly unlike any other multiplayer experience on consoles today.

"It's an incredibly tense experience, and if it wasn't potentially frustrating it

wouldn't be tense," Karlson says. "The thing is, we have so many systems in place to try to make sure it doesn't devolve into a total grief fest."

Walking away from our day spent with *The Division*, I'm intrigued to play more. The narrative, open world, and skill trees have me eager to keep fighting, but one major question mark still hovers like a specter over Ubisoft's risky endeavor – end game. Massive wouldn't share its plans with us other than to say there are PvE opportunities outside of the Dark Zone, but giving players incentive to stick around once they wrap up the narrative and hit the level cap will be key to *The Division*'s success. » **Matt Bertz**

The PC Difference

PC owners shouldn't be worried about receiving a dumbed down port of a console game with *The Division*. Red Storm is handling the responsibilities of bringing the game to PC, and in doing so is adding many enhancements not found on the PS4 and Xbox One like user interface customization, multi-monitor support, and an unlocked framerate.

Dangerous Golf

A crash course in chaos

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Three Fields
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Three Fields
Entertainment

» **Release**
Spring

Dangerous Golf is, in fact, not a golf game. Golf doesn't have gas stations that blow up or balls that teleport. Nor does it inspire that lizard part of your brain that wants to destroy everything in sight and cackle at the carnage. Leave it to Three Fields Entertainment – the people who twistedly conceived the Burnout series as the founders of Criterion Games (Alex Ward and Fiona Sperry) – to take the basic concept of putting a ball in a hole and make it about reveling in the destruction you create along the way.

There aren't any swing meters, clubs, or out of bounds areas in Dangerous Golf. Push the analog stick to start your first shot, aiming at the areas you can smash up the most stuff or complete an objective like hitting a certain number of objects, and let it fly. If you cause enough damage, you earn a Smashbreaker. Now your ball is on fire, and as you steer it around the room (including gas, brake, and slow-mo functions) it becomes more powerful, bowling over everything in its path.

You wouldn't think there is much strategy to smashing things to bits,

but during the Smashbreaker you have to keep in mind the hole location. You don't necessarily need to get close to it for the putt, because you can rack up a lot of money by performing a trick shot before it goes in the hole. Whether you're across the room and want to bounce off the walls to get into the hole, or if you're inches away and turn around, bonk it off your TV screen, and eventually make your way into the hole, the further you travel the better the multiplier. Miss, however, and you lose half your score for the hole. Bonuses are applied for things like turning your back to the hole for a shot, whether you splattered anything on the camera or wall, and other feats you'll have to discover.

The levels take place in locations like a gas station, palace, kitchen, and castle, with multiple holes using different configurations. Variety is endemic in travelling through multiple rooms to get to the flag, hitting certain objects but not others, having to keep the ball off the floor, or not even being able to see the flag at all. What if you could transport the ball across the hole? Or there were vehicles involved? How

do you deal with having more than one ball? All these factors add replayability and challenge, and as the game progresses you revisit holes with new tools at your disposal and the ability to smash objects that were previously unbreakable. Competitive and co-op play (including online and couch co-op) also add texture, although the developer isn't ready to talk about that yet.

Comparisons to Burnout's Crash mode are natural, but Three Fields co-founder Alex Ward isn't living in the past. "We don't look back at the stuff we did with nostalgia, we look back with a view of taking it to that next level," he says. That's not just the philosophy the 10-person team is taking toward this downloadable title – who have put their life savings on the line for this endeavor – it's a real risk. "You have to feel free enough, as the game makers, to be able to try anything," Ward says. "There were times in the development when we've stopped and gone, 'Are we doing enough? This is the one chance we get to do this. What can we do?'" We'll find out if it's enough later this spring.

» **Matthew Kato**



UFC 2

Going for the knockout

Following a decent debut outing in 2014, EA Sports is lining up for a second bout as the carrier of the UFC brand. This time around, a host of new changes hope to improve upon some of the weaker areas of the last game.

While the graphics in UFC 2 are noticeably enhanced, the first thing fans of the last game should take note of is the improved grappling and ground mechanics. The previous game was almost turn-based in how the two fighters interacted with one another. If one fighter entered into an animation or movement, that fighter would complete the animation uninterrupted before the other fighter could make their move. With UFC 2, fighters act independent of each other, leading to a more dynamic experience. In addition, the new grappling system gives better visual

feedback to let you know why your inputs are unsuccessful, and introduces standing submissions and submission chaining to add more depth.

Also revamped from last year are the knockout physics. These new physics aim to make satisfying K.O.s look and feel more authentic, and stand out as director Brian Hayes' favorite addition this year. "I've been playing the game now for months in development and I still see knockouts that blow me away with the physics system," he says. "No matter what game mode you're playing and whether you're an offline career mode kind of player or an online competitive player, these knockouts are going to be a big win for everybody."

The new Ultimate Team mode, which is borrowed from other series like Madden and FIFA, gives you the ability to build a team of five fighters and

continually improve them using cards purchased with in-game currency. Unlike traditional Ultimate Team modes, in which you build teams of actual professional players, UFC 2's version gives you cards to upgrade created fighters, delivering a markedly different experience. To earn currency, you compete with other created fighters online or against A.I. opponents locally. As your fighters level up individually, your team levels up as well.

Those wanting a more traditional single-player experience can still put a created fighter through the paces in the single-player offline career mode. Deeper training camps and better differentiation between opponents has the team hopeful that the career mode can deliver a more varied experience. In addition, EA Sports has tried to shake up the linearity of the mode by providing more meaningful choices through your fighter's ascent through the ranks of the UFC.

The fighter creation tools are receiving an added boost as well. You can now do advanced face sculpting and customization using a huge number of tattoo layers.

If UFC 2 can deliver on all of the promises, it could be the mixed martial arts title fans have been craving for years. With revamped grapple mechanics and an improved emphasis on replayability, the game has us hopeful that the result will be more of a knockout than a split decision victory. But with so many improvements promised, it remains to be seen if EA Sports can deliver on all fronts. » **Brian Shea**

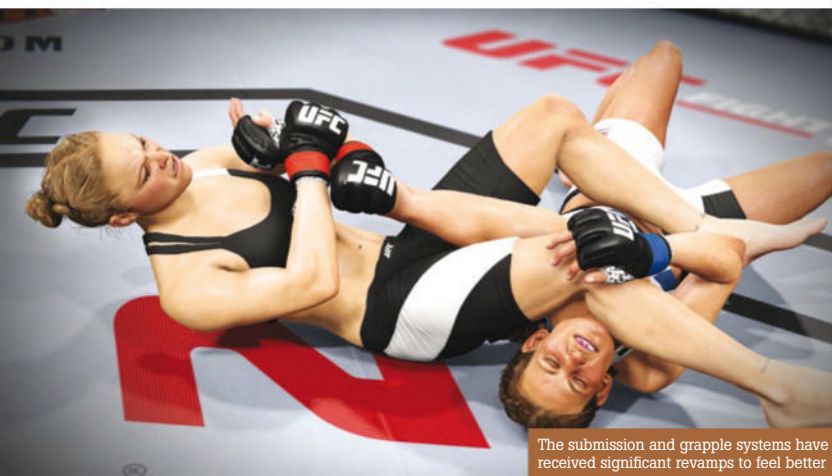
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

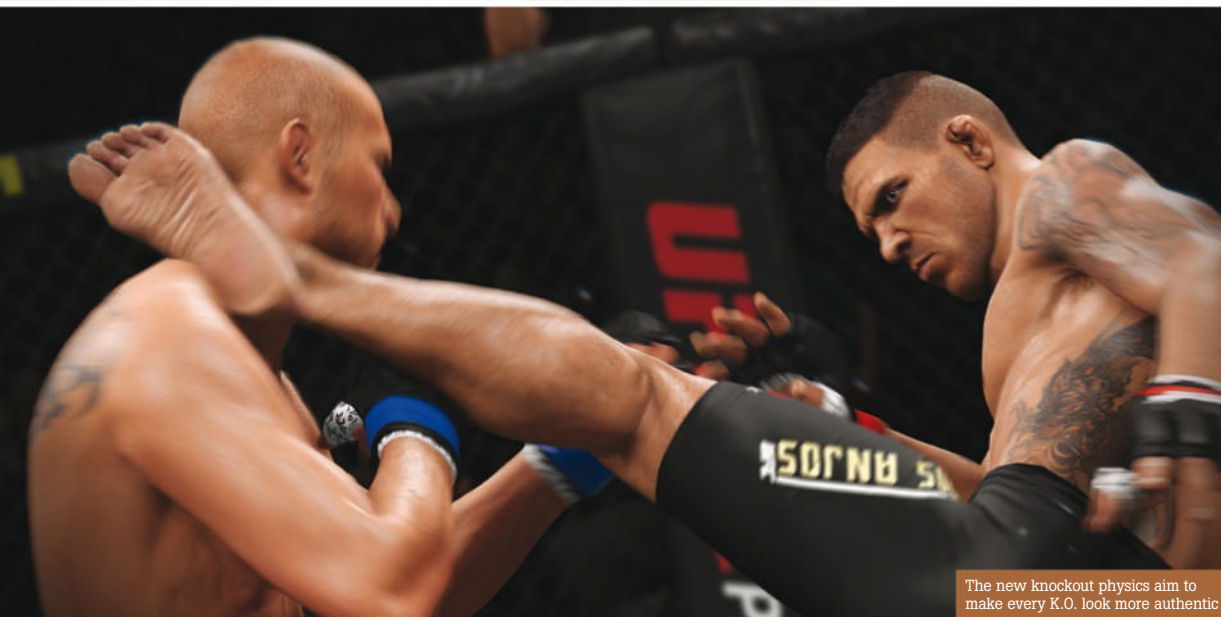
» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Canada

» **Release**
March 15



The submission and grapple systems have received significant revamps to feel better



The new knockout physics aim to make every K.O. look more authentic

A More Massive Roster

Though the UFC 2 roster hasn't been finalized, the team is promising more than 250 fighters at launch. Those who pre-order the game also receive legendary MMA fighters Bas Rutten and Kazushi Sakuraba, and boxing legend Mike Tyson. Director Brian Hayes says that more active UFC fighters will be added through free roster updates, while fighters not currently fighting in the UFC could be added through DLC.



Gravity Rush 2

Upping the ante on a new platform

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

The Gravity Rush 2 announcement seemed to come out of nowhere at last year's TGS. The original game performed well critically but was Vita-exclusive, which didn't exactly garner it a large fan base considering the handheld's install base never really took off. However, Sony didn't allow the wrong platform to prevent it from seeing Gravity Rush's larger potential, and the follow-up is taking the series to new heights with an open-world adventure on the PlayStation 4. This means bigger environments, more physics effects, and the opportunity to craft a larger narrative around them.

Gravity Rush 2 still has Kat at the helm and picks up shortly after its predecessor. The story begins with fellow gravity-shifter Raven and police officer Syd assisting Kat in investigating strange gravitational waves occurring all over Hekseville, but soon Kat is snatched up by a gravity storm and taken to a remote mining village. Raven plays a bigger role in this game, fighting alongside Kat in her journey. The two are no longer at odds and have developed a friendship since the first game. However, it still hasn't been revealed what forces Kat and Raven into battle or what major conflict they face outside of the gravity storm.

The open world contains a bustling floating city with tons of missions for Kat to take on. Developers have described the new locale as giving off a vibe you'd get from visiting South America or Southeast Asia. The tropical destination is inviting with sunny skies, palm trees, and tables with umbrellas.

While not much has been revealed outside of a few trailers, the physics-based action offers new gravity styles (Lunar and Jupiter) for players to experiment with and unlock different combat maneuvers. Lunar style makes Kat lighter, allowing her to move faster, while Jupiter style makes her heavier and slower, but also makes her stronger to take on tougher foes. It appears you can switch between styles quickly, providing you different movesets. For instance, when in Jupiter style Kat has a powerful attack that can target multiple enemies. As Kat uses her different gravity styles, the destructible parts of the environment break apart, adding to the chaos. In addition, the game also has tag-team battles with Kat and Raven, where the A.I. takes control of the latter.

Much of Gravity Rush 2 still remains a mystery, but one thing is certain: This is Gravity Rush on a much larger level. It will be interesting to see how it fares as an open-world adventure. Sony launches Gravity Rush Remastered this month to get PS4 users up to speed with Kat's journey, and it has already been confirmed that Gravity Rush 2 will not appear on Vita.

» **Kimberley Wallace**





Nier: Automata

An exciting revival

When the original *Nier* launched back in 2010, it quickly became a cult hit, captivating gamers with its mature storyline and fun action-based combat. Unfortunately, that same year, its developer Cavia shuttered its doors. Between that unfortunate turn of events and the game's niche appeal, the door seemed to close on any further games in the universe... until Square Enix surprised fans by announcing a new game at this past E3. *Nier: Automata* brings back the masterminds from the original – series creator Taro Yoko, producer Yosuke Saito, and composer Keiichi Okabe – but it's also adding the power of Platinum Games, best known for its stylish flair in *Bayonetta* and *Metal Gear Solid: Revengeance*. This collaboration seems to hit all the right notes.

Automata shares only minor connections with its predecessor; it's set in the same world, but in a different era. Expect some returning characters, such as Emil and references to the *Drakengard* and *Nier* universe, but beyond that *Automata* has its own self-contained storyline. After being invaded by a mysterious machine army, humanity has fled to the Moon as its new safe haven, but is ready to take back earth by sending an elite android army to take care of business. The main character is YoRHa No. 2 Model B, called '2B' for short. This

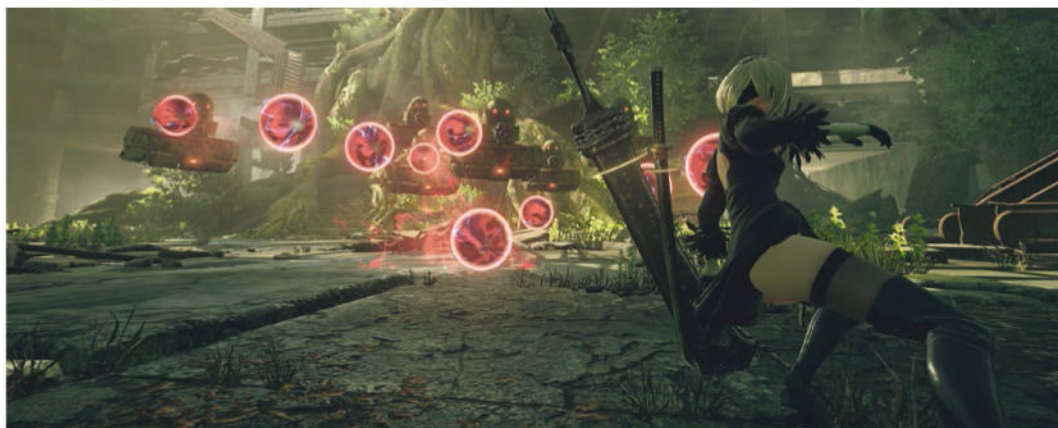
female android doesn't have much in the way of emotions and is more level-headed than anything else. Including 2B, the game has three playable characters, but no concrete information on the other leads has been revealed yet. True to form, *Automata* features multiple endings.

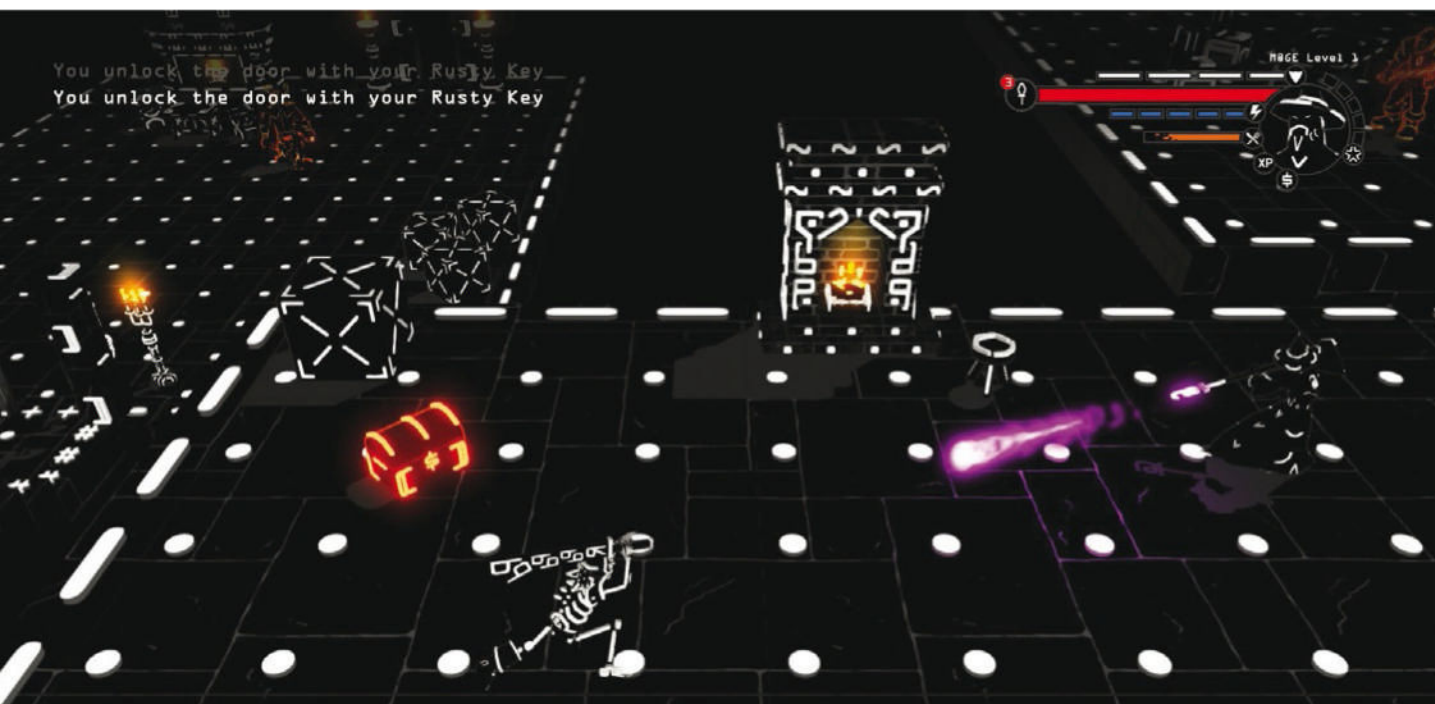
We don't know much in the way of gameplay yet. The first combat trailer debuted at Paris Games Week, showing Platinum's hand in the action. Battling is what you'd expect from the developer: fast-paced and combo-heavy with beautiful animations. It also still captures the essence of the original with a bevy of cool swords, but the action looks faster, smoother, and more chaotic, requiring you to make use of the dodge button.

YoRHa No. 2 also has a pod device that travels with her, which can attack from afar while she takes care of enemies up close. She can also use it to glide around environments, and the developers have already dropped hints that you can ride some of the animals roaming the land, such as boar and deer. The trailer also showcases that while the *Nier* world is more technologically advanced since we last saw it, it still has a similar look and feel to the original, especially the ruins you explore. The somber tone shines through.

Right now, no concrete release date has been announced and we've still seen little of the game, but it sure is exciting to see a new *Nier* entry become a reality. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Platinum Games
- » **Release**
2016





Brutal

More than a nostalgia grab

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Stormcloud Games
- » **Release**
Summer

Brutal turned more than a few heads when it was introduced at PSX last year, and it's not hard to see why. The dungeon-crawling roguelike's gorgeous retro aesthetic is derived from text-heavy ASCII games, like Empire and Dwarf Fortress, but Brutal does more than just use that visual style for the sake of eyecandy. In a playful and amusing twist on crafting, Stormcloud Games has also developed a system where players can build unique weapons out of collectible ASCII letters they discover throughout each dungeon.

At the start of each session, a player is dropped into the first dungeon with only their fists and a torch, requiring them to search the environment for breakable objects and treasure chests that contain crafting materials for items that will raise their odds of surviving the game's 23 levels. Brutal is old-school

fantasy to its core, letting you select a class that has its own unique abilities (warrior, mage, amazon, ranger) and fight your way across the game, with enemies literally bursting into red, wet explosions upon death, until a final confrontation with a massive dragon. For those who yearn for more Gauntlet-style experiences, Stormcloud is even developing a local multiplayer component that will allow a party of four to take on its labyrinth of terror.

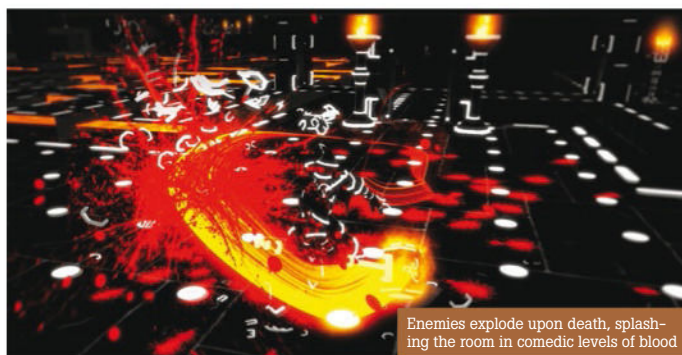
When I ask Stormcloud producer Richard Wood how they plan to make Brutal stand out in a sea of roguelikes, he says, "The obvious thing is our art style. We've taken that original ASCII rogue-like look and tried to blend it with 3D models and make something look unique but also semi-modern."

Wood says Brutal has the sort of gameplay elements one expects from a roguelike, including restarting the

game from the very beginning with no upgrades once a player dies, but that the developer would also be incorporating "classic ASCII features" to add some twists. In addition to crafting weapons, players can hunt down enhancements to make those weapons are even more powerful and potion recipes for concoctions to be used against enemies. Wood also mentions a leveling-up system for characters' armor but didn't go into the specifics of that particular system.

I haven't gotten my hands on Brutal yet but I'm eagerly looking forward to some time with it. Though it faces plenty of competition in its genre, Stormcloud is trying to take a classic concept and making it feel fresh again with features designed to keep players returning to its dungeons to vanquish foes and unearth treasures.

» **Javy Gwaltney**



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BETWEEN FAMILY.
EXCEPT A SWORD.***



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Blood or bond? Your choice is only the beginning.



Animated Blood
Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes

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Animated Blood
Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes

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MAP PACK 1  **Revelation**

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Star Citizen

Zeroing in on sci-fi nirvana, but still light years away

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Online
Multiplayer Action

» **Publisher**
Cloud Imperium Games

» **Developer**
Cloud Imperium Games

» **Release**
2016

Developer Cloud Imperium Games is raking in the credits with a crowd-funded PC game, *Star Citizen*, which aims to transport would-be space explorers to the stars. I didn't grow up playing complicated flight sims or galactic dogfighting games like *X-Wing*, but I wasn't going to let my lack of expertise stop me from trying out *Star Citizen*.

I dove into *Star Citizen*'s most recent Alpha 2.0 update completely divorced from the ins and outs of its storied, sometimes controversial crowd-funding development that's now over the \$100 million mark. This latest pre-release build begins to stitch together the game's disparate features, namely space flight, first-person shooting, and spacewalks.

Even at this rough state of development, *Star Citizen* allows players to freely explore uncharted sectors of space. Walking through the futuristic halls of a space station, entering a depressurization chamber, and hopping in your very own Aurora starship before making the jump to lightspeed feels more empowering than other games of its ilk. For instance, in *Rebel Galaxy* players are mostly captive inside their cockpits for the entire game, and *Elite Dangerous* doesn't support on-foot exploration yet.

The experience is even more enchanting when you power down your ship and leap outside for an impromptu EVA (extravehicular activity). Make sure your ship has absolutely zero momentum, though, or you'll be using your EVA suit's weak thrusters to idiotically chase down your ship



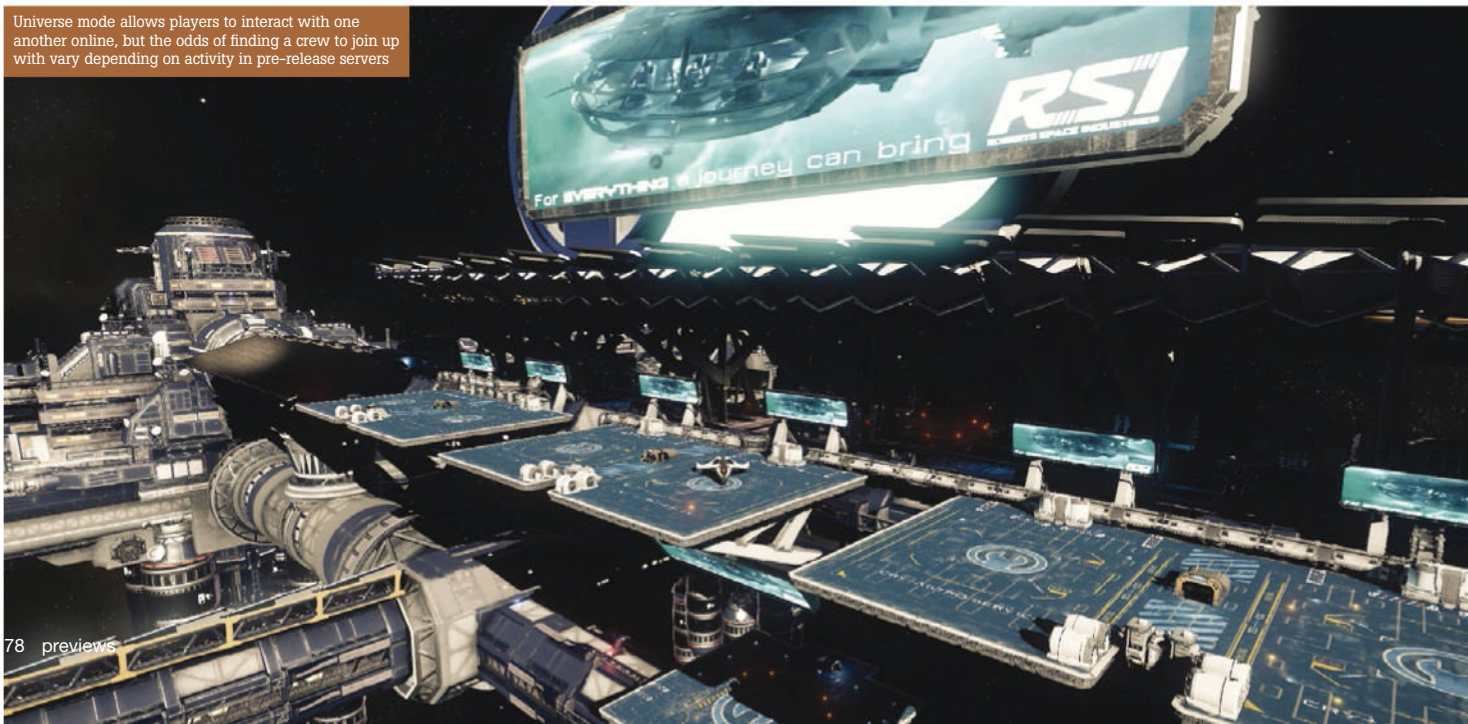
as it floats off into the void. Outside, I enjoyed inspecting inactive satellites for an entrance, hunting down an interactive panel within, and getting them back online. At this point in development, fixing comm arrays is one of only a few tasks you can do in the online Universe Mode that makes it actually feel like a game.

Floating outside the safety of your armed craft is enough to make you feel vulnerable, but the anxiety really kicks in when radio chatter announces that enemy ships are flying in. Navigating three-dimensional space can be initially intimidating, but I quickly acclimated to the basics. Each weapon has unique targeting reticles for leading your shots,

and delivering a volley of deadly missiles is as easy as clicking a single button. I was turning pesky fighters into space junk in no time. *Star Citizen* is already a gorgeous game, and the visuals shine when an enemy ship explodes with a colorful blast.

I carved out several fun hours exploring the stars despite the unfinished game's consistent crashes, lacking in-game guidance, and general bugginess. *Star Citizen* shows great potential to deliver our sci-fi dreams, but has a long ways to go. Unless you're a diehard space jockey I recommend waiting until Cloud Imperium Games builds out its promising fuselage with more robust features. » **Tim Turi**

Universe mode allows players to interact with one another online, but the odds of finding a crew to join up with vary depending on activity in pre-release servers





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Squad

Projecting reality into modern shooters

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
100-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Offworld Industries

» **Developer**
Offworld Industries

» **Release**
2017
(Early Access Now)

More than 10 years ago, a group of ambitious modders banded together to create a Battlefield 2 conversion that made the combat more realistic and increased the focus on teamwork. Dubbed Project Reality, this fresh approach to fire-fights became so popular it eventually became a standalone game. With a dearth of realistic shooters on the current market, many of those same developers are getting the band back together for a new Kickstarter funded project called Squad.

This spiritual successor to Project Reality is trying to find a sweet spot between the hardcore simulation-focused Arma series and more entertainment-oriented shooters like Battlefield. Squad's firefights don't take place at 800 meters or in close quarters combat where an enemy is around every corner. Instead, your squad sets out on a large map (typically four square kilometers) and must move strategically through the valleys, mountains, and forests en route to the objective. "The backbone of the entire game is the pacing of combat," says lead map designer Chris Greig. "Those periods where you just walk with the squad and shoot the s--- before you get into an engagement are very intentional. They are an integral part of the Squad experience. Everything gets calm, you relax, and then the first bullet goes off and the grenade comes in and then it's 10 minutes of hell. And if you survive it you regroup and heal everybody up and resume your conversation." Whether this is fun or not ultimately comes down to if you enjoy the company you are keeping.



Medics can drag incapacitated soldiers to safety and patch them up

When you finally reach a hotzone, it can be disorienting. Most of the firefights I experienced in Squad were medium to long range, which means you don't always know where the fire is coming from. This adds a nice bit of tension while moving through open expanses and makes it essential that you watch for tracer fire. It takes a while to get used to the weapon ballistics – don't expect to immediately start sniping enemies at range – so you have to be patient while learning the ropes.

Given this hot-and-cold rhythm to combat, soldiers have other jobs to complete while moving toward the objective as well. Squad leaders control the placement of respawn points, and base building tools allow teams to establish forward operating bases (FOBs), complete with offensive and defensive fortifications. These supply hubs are key to keeping your soldiers

well equipped and healthy. If the enemy overruns your FOB, your supply line will be cut. Using the built-in VOIP is critical to coordinating these efforts.

Squad is currently in early access, and developer Offworld still has a long list of tasks to complete before the game is fully featured. Planned additions include introducing weapon customization, integrating stat tracking, and adding vehicles ranging from tanks and APCs to an array of choppers. When the game is feature complete, Greig says it should have five game modes and at least nine maps. The studio plans to release the SDK soon so the community can start making its own maps as well.

Offworld hopes to have Squad ready for retail deployment in 18 months. If you don't want to wait that long, you can check it out now on Steam early access. » **Matt Bertz**



Stellaris

Grand strategy in space

When you mix some of the philosophies behind epic grand strategy titles like Paradox's Crusader Kings II and the modern day space 4X (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate), you end up with something like Stellaris. While it's still very much a galactic battle for dominance in an unexplored galaxy where you'll be playing in the style of your choice toward eventual victory, Paradox

is playing with concepts that don't often find their way into the traditional 4X space.

The early game is designed to be the most familiar for strategy players – you find new planets to colonize, conduct research, discover artifacts, and perhaps bandy about with an early military strategy. Things diverge significantly in the middle and late game, where anything can happen. Paradox

wants to combat the ennui that can occur in the genre, where a player can attain "can't really lose" status, turning the game into a meaningless cycle of turns. Epic events can occur in the game that can turn everything on its head in a heartbeat, from a mass alien invasion to other catastrophic, game-altering events that require all players to keep on their toes for the entirety of the game, not just until they enter a comfortable win state path.

Variety is paramount toward other aspects of the game as well, including research. Players are given random sets of options to work toward instead of specific trees, which incentivizes branching off and trying new things, especially as rare options weave their way in. You can still play the way you want, but the game definitely challenges you as you go by presenting risk-reward scenarios that might make you delve outside your wheelhouse for powerful perks.

By focusing on keeping things fresh from game-to-game and dealing with huge galaxies designed to support up to 32 players in multiplayer, Stellaris is taking the resurging PC genre to uncharted stars with a bit of Paradox's signature flair. We're excited to experience the genre with some additional skill-based variance when it hits sometime in 2016. » **Daniel Tack**

» Platform

PC • Mac

» Style

1-Player Strategy
(32-Player Online)

» Publisher

Paradox Interactive

» Developer

Paradox Interactive

» Release

2016



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

Total War: Warhammer

Magic meets massive warfare

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Creative Assembly

» **Release**
April 28

Creative Assembly's Total War titles are well known for combining turn-based strategy and real-time battles that field swarms of troops and siege weapons. Until now, these titles have always had some sort of rooted historical anchor and played within the confines of the associated warfare technology. In short, there were rules and reality at the core of the experience. That all goes out the window with the upcoming Total War: Warhammer, where the series tackles magic and mayhem within the same classic structures that lend themselves to huge, epic battles between massive forces on the battlefield.

Total War: Warhammer features four playable factions each with their own special units and powers: Empire, Greenskins, Dwarfs, and Vampire Counts. Warhammer fans will undoubtedly delight to see many mechanics interpreted for use here, such as the Greenskin "Waaagh" rallying and frenzying the troops, but players new to the universe shouldn't have any trouble finding a favorite.

The new styles of units alone make the title a significant shift away from barbarian hordes and Roman soldiers—everything from giant ogres, spiders, steam tanks, and demigryphs are fair game. Watching these units face off in combat on the battlefield is frankly far more interesting than watching Romans hack each other to pieces

as they line up siege-equipment, and seeing flying units like dragons come to life in the Total War series for the first time is awesome.

Along with wild unit types entering the fray, actual magic is coming to the series as well. These powerful abilities are often controlled by fragile spellcasters but have significant battle-altering impact, like the Celestial Wizard's Comet of Casandora or an

Orc Shaman's Foot of Gork destroying everything in their path.

All of these new features and unit styles join the standard elements of the franchise, including city-building, diplomacy, resource management, unit production, and campaign maps. I'm excited to see what bringing core fantasy to the more historically-rooted Total War series does for the game.

» **Daniel Tack**



A wide range of faction specific units and playstyles spice combat up





Torment: Tides Of Numenera

Old time rock and roll

Torment: Tides Of Numenera is a very particular kind of game.

There's a good deal of hype behind the isometric RPG given it's a spiritual successor to the acclaimed Planescape: Torment, a classic RPG that cracked our Top 200 Games of All Time list. Still, I was concerned that Numenera's fidelity to its predecessor, an RPG from 1999, might result in something that would be a chore to play through. Having spent two hours

with the game, my concerns have mostly evaporated.

Numenera is beautifully presented, with gorgeous backgrounds and entrancing prose that makes reading through the numerous text-heavy portions a joy. In an opening that cribs hard from *Inception*, your character awakens in a mysterious, crystalized limbo and has to strand together memories to escape, eventually emerging into another dimension where they fend off

creeping monstrosities while searching for a way to regain control of their consciousness. During this process, you're answering questions that help create your character in a way that's genuinely exciting.

Whether the game can retain that momentum and sense of wonder for the rest of the journey is a question that won't be answered until after release but, for now, Numenera feels like it's on the right trajectory. » **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
InXile Entertainment

» **Developer**
InXile Entertainment

» **Release**
2016

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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

86 The Witness

Drawing lines on a grid might seem simple, but The Witness demonstrates how complex and rewarding it can be. The latest puzzle game from Jonathan Blow (Braid), The Witness is a series of fascinating and entertaining challenges that make your mind work in new ways. With hundreds of brilliant puzzles to push your limits, this is one of the most polished and clever puzzle games in years. Singling out one release is always hard (especially with the great Darkest Dungeon in this issue), but The Witness inches ahead to get the nod as our Game of the Month.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	That one person still complaining about Episode VII spoilers.

AWARDS

 gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
 gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
 gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
 gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Let's
Go
Places

The Witness

Creating complexity from simplicity

9.25

PS4 • PC

» Concept

Explore an island and solve a staggering array of fascinating puzzles

» Graphics

Colorful surroundings and interesting structures make each zone uniquely beautiful

» Sound

The soundtrack is sparse and the voice recordings are few, so you're mainly hearing ambient sound effects

» Playability

Though the puzzles are complicated, your tools for solving them and navigating the world are simple and accessible

» Entertainment

Fun and inventive challenges wait around every corner. If you want something more than a barrage of thoughtful puzzles (like a story), you should look elsewhere

» Replay Value

Moderately high

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OF THE
GAME MONTH

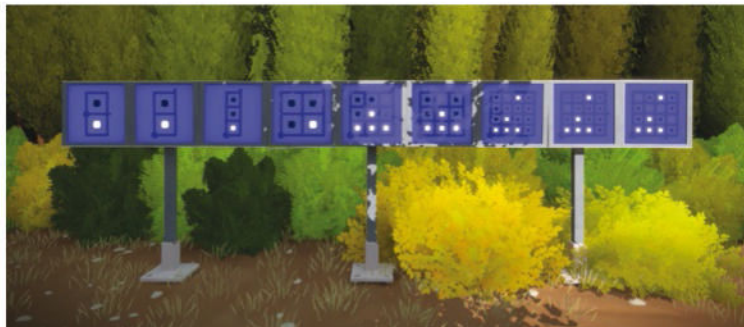
gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher Thekla Inc.
Developer Thekla Inc. Release January 26 Rating E

The most memorable puzzle games take root in your mind and keep you thinking. From imagining blue and orange portals around your office to seeing tetrominoes as you try to sleep, playing around with fun puzzle concepts doesn't always stop when you put down the controller. Like the genre greats, *The Witness* has the same ability to infiltrate your perception and draw you in. The core mechanic is deviously simple, but it paves the way for brain-bending puzzles and cascading "a-ha" moments that are among the best games can offer.

As the lone person on an island full of ruins and mysterious devices, your basic goal is drawing lines. The gorgeous open world serves primarily as a delivery method for hundreds of monitors displaying grids, and you need to trace paths from the designated starting points to the ending points. Of course, you can't just scribble anything; your line's exact path is important, and is the basis for an unbelievable amount of diversity and creativity within this straightforward structure. Symbols on the grid require you to outline particular shapes. Physical objects obscure your view. Your surroundings might provide necessary clues. The grid and symbols communicate the necessary information clearly, and the satisfaction that comes from identifying the trick and then arriving at the right solution is immense and frequent.

Because figuring out the requirements and their obstacles is part of the fun, I won't spoil much about the forms the puzzles take – but put aside any concerns that they might feel too similar. Developer Jonathan Blow and the team at Thekla have created an astonishing variety of elegant and polished problems incorporating elements like colors, shadows, and spatial manipulation.



Each new twist and surprise left me impressed, and I only got more absorbed as I uncovered more.

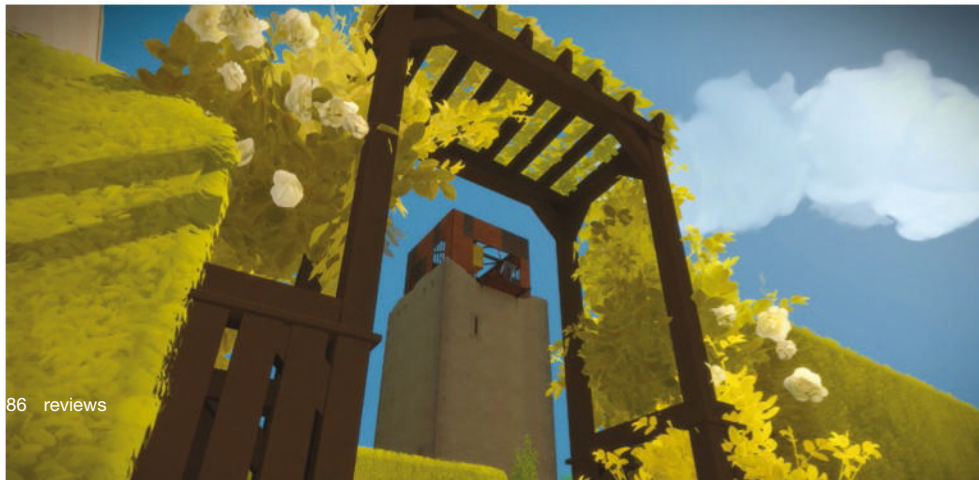
Fans of Blow's previous game, *Braid*, might be surprised to find some notable similarities in *The Witness*. The format is different, but it relies on the same principle of gradually building a vocabulary, and then challenging what players think they know about how the pieces function and interact with each other. It doesn't repeat the same idea over and over; most puzzles are organized into groups that feature variations on a theme, but each one in the sequence adds a new layer to constantly push your thinking in different directions. This approach is perfect, since it allows players to experience a bunch of smaller victories as they progress toward clearing an entire zone.

When you do reach the final puzzles in a sequence, don't expect an easy win and a pat on the back. One of my favorite parts of *The Witness* is its refusal to treat players like idiots. The only hand-holding that happens is the gradual progression from the "teaching puzzles" to the more complex and full-blown applications of the concepts. You don't have a magic hint button to nudge you in the right direction, so if you hit a tough puzzle, you're on your own.

You may need to draw things on paper, play with cut-out shapes, or take some notes. By the end of my playthrough, the array of dots, lines, grids, and other doodles on my desk made me look like a crazed conspiracy theorist. I relished the opportunity to work for the solutions, because the effort makes victory that much sweeter. If I encountered a puzzle that was too hard or complicated, I just walked away and returned to it later. You can move between the zones freely, and you don't need to clear all of them to reach the end-game puzzles, so you can almost always make progress somewhere.

If you jump between areas, you don't need to worry about jumbling the plot. *The Witness* isn't a story-forward title, though the state of the island poses some implicit questions. These aren't addressed during a normal playthrough, which is my only major complaint. The air of mystery invites speculation, but the world is practically barren on the narrative front. Why are you on the island? Who set up all the monitors? Why is everything in ruins? Puzzle games don't need an involved plot, but *The Witness*' atmosphere plants the seeds of a story that doesn't grow. You can find some answers in certain voice recordings, but they are few and well-hidden – facts that make the ending particularly strange and anticlimactic.

The opaque world might be disappointing for some players, but *The Witness* is about a different kind of discovery. It steers your mind in unconventional directions, and makes you feel clever as you build on your knowledge and uncover new layers about the game's language and logic. Even when I wasn't playing it, I was thinking about puzzles that had me stumped. Some puzzles are tough, but all of them are fair, and the fun of solving them is only topped by seeing what awaits you on the next series of monitors. » Joe Juba





Resident Evil Zero HD Remaster

A harrowing prequel adventure worth revisiting



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** January 19 **Rating** M

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

The smoldering, destroyed helicopter of the S.T.A.R.S. Bravo Team is one of the first sights to behold in the first Resident Evil. Jill Valentine, Chris Redfield, and the rest of the Alpha Team crew have little time to investigate what happened to their lost compatriots before they're forced to flee into a nearby mansion to avoid becoming puppy chow. Resident Evil Zero, set a day before the infamous Mansion Incident, explores the journey of S.T.A.R.S. Bravo Team medic Rebecca Chambers and an unlikely ally through Umbrella's nasty facilities. Capcom has given this prequel the same treatment as last year's HD update of the excellent Resident Evil GameCube remake, complete with more accessible control options.

Resident Evil Zero is the last hardcore survival horror entry in the series, before the juggernaut Resident Evil 4 sparked a dramatic paradigm shift away from the demanding resource management, complex puzzles, and fixed camera angles. Rebecca teams up with fugitive Billy Coen as they explore a runaway luxury train, abandoned Umbrella Training Facility, and other appropriately ominous locales that tie into the early RE games in fun ways. Controlling both Rebecca and Billy, sometimes simultaneously, is a unique departure from the standard formula. The new control scheme – which eschews awkward “tank controls” in favor of characters moving in the direction of the analog stick – works wonders here, especially

when controlling both characters with both sticks at once. The more agile characters don't completely break the balance of the game, either, as sloppy play will get you chewed up by zombies or swallowed whole by mutant frogs.

The original 1996 Resident Evil kicked off an early series tradition of magically interconnected storage boxes. Before settling on that design decision, creator Shinji Mikami experimented with not having them connected, and instead tasking players with schlepping all their guns and items around the game with them. Resident Evil Zero returns to that concept, but instead removes all the boxes entirely, allowing players to leave items anywhere on the map. While it's initially liberating to quickly toss out your knife or an unwanted ink ribbon, the system can become tedious. Trying to angle your character just right to pick up an item can be tricky, especially if the new, optional zoomed-in widescreen mode cuts an item you're looking for out of the shot. Additionally, nearly as much time is spent swapping ammo and items between characters as exploring the creepy environments, which can hurt the pacing of the game.

If you survive Rebecca and Billy's journey through the carcasses of Umbrella's treacherous past, you'll unlock Wesker Mode. This new feature, not included in the original GameCube release, allows fans to play through the entirety of Resident Evil Zero's story as the super-powered Wesker (circa RE 5) and a mind-controlled Rebecca.

Besides her red, glowing eyes and villainous outfit, Rebecca plays the same as Billy in the main game. Wesker takes Billy's place, including in-engine cutscenes where he syncs up with Billy's original voice acting and animations. Seeing Wesker implemented into some cutscenes is a goofy bonus, but the real meat of it is in finally controlling the series' big bad guy in a core storyline. Wesker can dash around environments as comically high speeds, juking past enemies with ease. Controlling such a nimble character within a game designed with cautious, meticulous play in mind is bizarre at first. Wesker's Death Stare ability breaks the game's difficulty in a delightfully absurd way, allowing him to charge up a laser-eye attack that blasts out enough power to pop off every zombie's head in the entire room. Imagine Tetsuo's bloody hospital hallway scene from Akira and you're on the right track. The absurd new mode is a fun power-trip victory lap for longtime fans.

This HD remaster of Resident Evil Zero is an easy recommendation for anyone who enjoyed the original GameCube release and has enough patience to navigate the sometimes tedious inventory management. New fans of the classic survival horror formula that came on board following last year's Resident Evil HD Remaster shouldn't expect as tight of an experience, but one that's deserving of its place in the core franchise and fleshes out Umbrella's troubled history with dramatic flair. » **Tim Turi**

» Concept

Give this GameCube prequel the same treatment as last year's excellent Resident Evil HD Remaster

» Graphics

Resident Evil Zero's pre-rendered backgrounds and disgustingly detailed monsters look great with the new coat of polish

» Sound

Everything from the ragged zombie moans to the satisfying clack of shells being loaded into your shotgun sound great

» Playability

The updated control scheme does wonders, but the clunky inventory management is showing its age

» Entertainment

A skillfully crafted example of bygone horror games that still holds up today

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Legend Of Heroes: Trails Of Cold Steel

Intriguing personalities and tense battles make school a blast

8.5



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Xseed Games Developer Nihon Falcom Release December 22 Rating T

PS3 • Vita

» Concept

Spend a year at Thors Military Academy to discover the dangers of political warfare

» Graphics

The graphics are dated and a few framerate hiccups occur, but that doesn't distract from the experience due to the vibrant world and interesting people that accompany it

» Sound

The music and voice performances are fantastic, enhancing every moment from intense battles to classmate chatter

» Playability

Trails of Cold Steel has a solid learning curve, but it also leaves plenty to figure out through experimentation

» Entertainment

With fun combat, interesting twists, and a cool social system, Trails of Cold Steel is one of my favorite recent RPGs

» Replay Value

Moderate

Many traditional role-playing games get a bad rap for taking too long to let you experience the best they have to offer. Whether it's poor pacing, tutorial-heavy introductions, or a repetitious structure, the entry barrier can be difficult to overcome. With Cold Steel, I was eager to jump back into combat and exploration throughout the entire journey. Every component is so well-done and wonderfully paced that no part outstays its welcome.

Trails of Cold Steel puts you in the shoes of Rean Schwarzer, a seemingly normal guy starting his first day at Thors Military Academy. The gameplay capitalizes on its academic setting; you take written and combat exams, socialize with classmates, and go on field trips. All of the school activities fold well into all of the other systems, creating an entertaining loop that makes the game hard to put down. It immerses you in student life, while also giving you worthwhile reasons to engage with it. For instance, socializing with your classmates grants you bonuses in battle and doing extra tasks for student council gives you beneficial items.

The characters and story start off generic, but learning more about the different personalities and the world reveal many intriguing threads. Rean is in the first class to not segregate noble and lowborn students, and the tension is palpable from his first day. The narrative explores these social divisions and the betrayal and sacrifice that come with politics, reminiscent of a Suikoden game, and the communication system allows you to build relationships, similar to Persona's social links.



I always looked forward to free time because it allowed me to see a different side to my classmate allies. They all have secrets and personal issues to confront, and exploring these in greater depth was one of my favorite parts of the game.

When you're not socializing or running errands, you're fighting through a mysterious schoolhouse or traveling to new lands to confront bigger baddies. The dungeon-crawling is broken up in a clever way, only making you tackle a few floors at once (usually three). Same goes for your field trips; you're only assigned a few quests and usually one or two of them are required to proceed in the main story. Even if you hit a difficulty wall, you have an out with an option to start the battle over with weakened enemies.

Unfortunately, some of the fetch quests (especially the optional ones) are a bore and the old school isn't that intriguing to explore, but you're not

spending much time on either. Field trips are more exciting because they usually take you to one of your classmate's hometowns, allowing you to see the different life they've led from others.

The combat features one of my favorite traditional battle systems to date. You can have four characters on the field at once, and can sub in any of your two supports during any turn. The turn order is listed in the corner, but randomly certain bonuses (and later penalties) can be granted, guaranteeing a critical attack or restoring health, crafts, or magic. Order can be influenced by upping your speed, casting time, or canceling opponent attacks with an unbalance move. So much strategy goes into battle, which makes every victory rewarding.

Placement and movement is also important. You can move combatants out of the area of an oncoming magical attack; placing them in different areas on the battlefield ensures no enemy attack can target more than one at a time, but limits your ability to cast group buffs. Linking characters to build relationships grants bonuses, like them blocking attacks or healing you in a time of need.

All of these systems don't even factor in the customization. All classmates have basic skills that they learn as they level up, but you can equip orbs that provide abilities and bonuses on your party members. I reveled in having this much control over building my group and giving them the skills I felt benefited them.

Trails of Cold Steel may not turn the genre on its head, but it does almost everything well. Xseed has already confirmed the next game in the trilogy is coming to North America, and after this delightful entry, I'm on board to see the next move. » **Kimberley Wallace**



» **Concept**

Assemble various teams of unique characters to battle against against deadly dungeons and bosses in stylized turn-based combat

» **Graphics**

The stylish look is one all its own and works incredibly well with the dire themes and environments

» **Sound**

The narration – done by Wayne June of Lovecraft audiobook fame – is stunning and makes the game feel like turning the pages of a Cthulhu nightmare

» **Playability**

The game is unforgivingly difficult, making it perfect for those looking for a dungeon-crawling challenge. Easily frustrated players will have a tough time adapting to the gameplay

» **Entertainment**

While the game can feel grindy at times and losing a critical team permanently is soul crushing, taking down big bosses, collecting treasure, and restoring the fallen hamlet to glory is challenging and fun

» **Replay Value**

High

Darkest Dungeon

Aphotic, atmospheric, and awesome



Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Red Hook Studios **Developer** Red Hook Studios **Release** January 19 **Rating** NA

Despair overtakes you as your houndmaster misses an all-important attack on an enemy fusilier, the lighter of the brigand's massive boss cannon. The cannon is going to fire this turn, and there's nothing left you can do to stop it. While your leper and bounty hunter land the finishing blows on the massive machine, your plague doctor and houndmaster fail to survive the encounter, joining the legions of the dead that occupy the hamlet's graveyard. Dead champions never return, but their memory will haunt you through all the battles and dungeons yet to come.

Tremendous highs and tumultuous lows combine in the Lovecraft-inspired, turn-based dungeon-crawler Darkest Dungeon. You're always one hit point or one mind sliver away from complete collapse as you explore winding halls of ruins, warrens, coves, and the titular Darkest Dungeon itself. Featuring permadeath, procedurally generated levels, and some aspects of permanent progression as the player builds up the decrepit hamlet into a bustling economy, the game is ultimately about finding combinations of curious glory seekers and treasure hunters and putting them to work against swarms of deadly and debilitating monsters. This dread ensemble is a pleasure to manage down to the finest details. With 14 different classes to choose from, each with many unique abilities, weapons to customize, skills to upgrade, quirks to manage, and diseases and afflictions to cure, you're always managing something.

With perseverance, you can even the odds against the nightmares ahead. The game strikes a brilliant balance most of the time, constantly testing the player to weigh resources and risks, but training a fresh team after a massive loss can be time consuming and punishing. This too, can be an important lesson: In Darkest Dungeon, discretion is often the better part of valor, and while mechanics make cowardice costly, it's far better than losing a team to the grave forever. Your hamlet will continue to improve even if your characters continue to head toward the grave, as most standard dungeon runs offer resources to help you upgrade your facilities. It's an important and satisfying mechanic that gives some sense of progression even in the face of overwhelming odds.

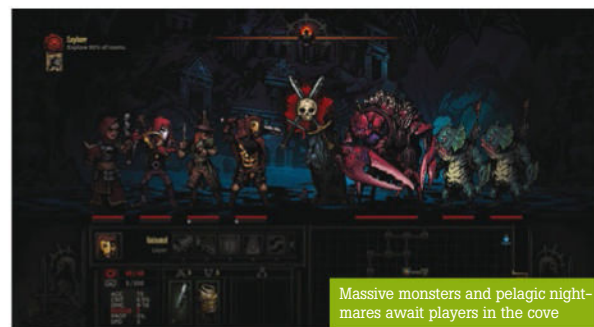
Darkest Dungeon tweaks the traditional task of managing character hit points by adding another element called stress. Darkness, enemy attacks, critical strikes, and watching comrades fall can all cause despair. A full stress bar gives the hero a chance for greatness in the face of terror, but the more likely outcome is a serious malady such as masochistic or antagonistic tendencies, which could lead your characters to injure themselves, become unresponsive to your orders, or chastise the rest of the team into deep depression. Managing these two resources along with light sources, provisions, and other supply items as you traverse the depths makes for an insightful lesson in risk-management, and it feels wonderfully satisfying when you deliver the deathblow

to a crawling chaos. Depending on the dungeon run, your heroes may come back with diseases, maladies, or stress that should be taken care within the hamlet before sending them out to venture again, making the construction of many different teams a necessity so some can adventure while others rest.

Darkest Dungeon boasts plenty of substance and style, but if you're averse to crushing difficulty it may prove to be too frustrating to be palatable. The uncompromising difficulty and challenge will be attractive to some, but could put off players looking for a simple crawler where you can outlevel or outgear content, and the sometimes grindy nature of recouping losses can take its toll.

Darkest Dungeon is an incredible take on the classic dungeon crawl. The game brings Lovecraftian lore to new heights with cool classes, powerful narration, stylish art, and addictive gameplay that will keep you crawling back to battle slithering monstrosities even as your favorite heroes become corpses.

» **Daniel Tack**



Massive monsters and pelagic nightmares await players in the cove

Final Fantasy Explorers

Leveraging Final Fantasy nostalgia to dull the repetition

7.75

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing Publisher Square Enix Developer Square Enix Release January 26 Rating E10+

3DS

» Concept

Give Final Fantasy fanatics a chance to explore a new island and take down classic baddies, while also offering the opportunity to engage with friends

» Graphics

The grainy graphics aren't anything to write home about, but the detail in the different armor you can equip is a nice touch

» Sound

The Final Fantasy victory music and other whimsical tunes keep you in the experience

» Playability

Tutorials ease you in, making the mechanics easy to grasp. The deeper systems require some experimentation

» Entertainment

From gear to popular monsters, fans will enjoy the fun upgrade system combined with all the content emblematic to the series, but the overall journey isn't exciting

» Replay Value

Moderate

Routine isn't always bad. Some players like knowing what to expect, completing familiar tasks and fulfilling an explicit list of objectives. In Final Fantasy Explorers, you search a vast landscape doing mundane tasks, such as killing specific monster types, but the payoff comes in how you turn your rewards into building your ideal character. Think of this quest-based, resource-gathering structure as a less complex version of Monster Hunter with a Final Fantasy skin; the core experience is about striving for the next big upgrade and reveling in all the Final Fantasy content.

If you're a Final Fantasy fan, Explorers was made for you, as it takes iconic parts of the franchise and infuses them in each portion of the game. You can find materials to forge new gear, such as Sephiroth's attire to don on your customizable avatar. Classic bosses like Ifrit and Shiva keep you on your toes. Fast travel is done using an airship, and you can buy items from Moogles. Exploring Amostra is exciting because you never know what classic monster from the franchise you'll find roaming the field, such as Chocobos and Adamantoise. Trance mode also allows you to transform into popular characters like Cloud and Lightning, but it's more a novelty than a super-move. The only part Explorers doesn't ape from the main series is an interesting story; the narrative is bare-bones and inconsequential.

The ties to Final Fantasy are a main part of the appeal, and the quest-driven gameplay loop exists mainly to deliver all of the nostalgia. You select one main expedition to complete at a time, but can also do numerous sub-quests simultaneously. Completing quests earns you points, which can then be used to be purchase various abilities

for your character and upgrade weapons. The quests themselves are basic, tasking you with taking down bosses, eliminating monsters, and collecting goodies on the field. They also allow you to reach new places in Amostra, from sandy beaches to fiery volcanoes. Beware, though, as Explorers' clunky UI can often get in the way of seeing what's out there.

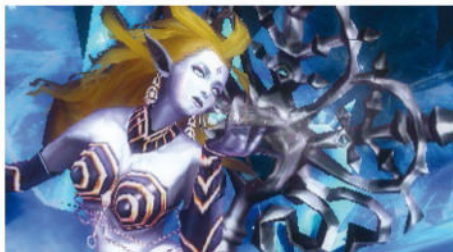
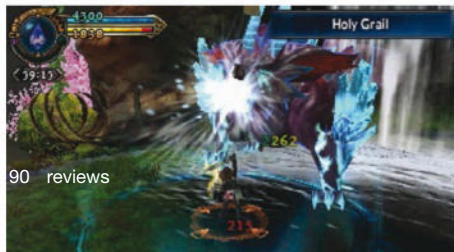
The quests get repetitive quickly, forcing you into a mindless routine with the goal of incrementally upgrading your character. I grew tired of doing similar tasks over and over, and more variety would have helped. On the bright side, the quests aren't long, although some require you have a certain amount of money before taking them on. This can be frustrating when you want to spend your money on upgrading weapons and abilities, but instead have to keep an untouched cash reserve to keep progressing.

You have complete control over your avatar; you can change jobs in town and unlock many additional selections (20 in total, including the Dark Knight and Samurai) along the way. You also can equip up to eight abilities at once, purchasing and upgrading only the ones you desire. Any ability you desire you can learn regardless of your job, but your custom abilities are specific to the weapon you wield. I liked having the ability to experiment and never being locked out of anything. For instance, I went with the Knight class at first and constantly upgraded my sword attacks whenever I could and loved seeing the damage multiply on tougher enemies, but that didn't prevent me from picking up cure or fire abilities if I desired. That being said, the custom abilities pack the bigger punch, so you're best to focus on those.

Explorers' greatest asset is how it makes you feel like you're always progressing. The more you do, the more that opens up. For instance, new weaponry becomes available to craft as you advance, and you're shown the required ingredients to make it, giving you something else to track down on your travels. The game even has a monster fusion system, which becomes another fun element for experimentation. After slaying certain enemies, you can pay to create them as a party member (bring up to three with you in battle). You can level up your monster allies and fuse them together for stronger combatants. Unfortunately, until your monsters reach high levels, they die quickly, (though they eventually revive automatically).

While the progression loop proves strong, the combat is disappointing. It relies on more button mashing and spamming special attacks than actual strategy (outside of running away from enemies before they attack). You have a special ability called crystal surge, which changes things up by adding elemental properties and other perks to your abilities. While battles get tougher as you advance, don't expect the same level of difficulty or tactics you'd put into a big fight like in Monster Hunter. Through local or online co-op, you can bring up to three friends in battle to slay beasts with you, but it's nearly identical to the single-player experience. Playing with friends is obviously more fun than relying on A.I. monsters, but it's not a game-changer.

Final Fantasy Explorers never fully captivated me. Building up your character is fun and the Final Fantasy fan in me enjoyed all the callbacks, but it didn't keep me invested. It gives you plenty to tinker with, but doesn't have the meat to back it up. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Mario & Luigi Paper Jam

When worlds collide



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo Developer Alpha Dream Release January 22 Rating E

8.75

3DS

» Concept

Combine the similar Mario & Luigi and Paper Mario franchises into one cohesive experience

» Graphics

Every animation, no matter how small, is full of charm. The juxtaposition of Mario & Luigi's and Paper Mario's aesthetics go together well

» Sound

Mario themes and sound effects play on your nostalgic sensibilities. The unfamiliar music does little to stand out

» Playability

Controlling three characters rarely feels overwhelming. Getting the hang of the timed button-press combat, special moves, and light platforming is easy

» Entertainment

Mario & Luigi continues to have the best sense of humor of Nintendo's assorted franchises, and a quicker pace in the tutorial and storytelling departments make this one of the best entries yet

» Replay Value

Moderately low



The Mario & Luigi and Paper Mario franchises have existed side by side for more than a decade, separate branches of Super Mario RPG's family tree. Despite their similarities in humor and the way combat plays out with timed button-presses in a turn-based setting, Paper Jam marks the first time the two franchises have merged. The combination works so well that I can't believe it took so long for the worlds to overlap.

The premise for how these two Mario worlds meet is unsurprisingly silly and can all be blamed on Luigi. The moment-to-moment plot isn't particularly compelling, but the paper-thin conceit is welcome as an excuse to have two different Marios, two different Peaches, and more familiar faces interact with each other. Bowser stands out as being particularly funny as he struggles to get along with himself; both Bowsers have to discipline their Bowser Juniors and they try to double-cross each other with literally the same secretive plans. The dialogue is consistently funny no matter what characters are on screen.

Combat has always felt similar between the two franchises, so combining them instantly feels comfortable. Battle plays it safe without going too crazy with bizarre timing or impossible

dodging. This accessibility is welcome, since you are managing three characters on the battlefield with the addition of Paper Mario. The Mario & Luigi series (the lead source of combat mechanics in this mash-up) blurs the turn-based/real-time combat line, with each fighter controlled by a separate button for both selecting attacks from menus, and dodging and countering attacks in real time. With three characters, fights can get confusing, but it never feels unfair.

A new system adds an additional layer to the core Mario & Luigi combat as you have a deck of cards on the lower screen that can be redeemed without sacrificing a turn for assorted bonuses. I didn't get excited about collecting new cards since their bonuses are small, but I eagerly took advantage of them during fights. Having a collectible with true gameplay value, even if I rarely went out of my way to find them, is nice.

The Mario & Luigi series has long struggled for a way to welcome and educate newcomers on how to play a new franchise while not bogging down returning fans with endless tutorials. The balance is typically far in favor of the newcomer, but Paper Jam strikes a much better middle ground. Combat tutorials are, for the most part, entirely optional. New attacks can be practiced

at your leisure (including in the middle of a fight) and even the opening recap of Mario & Luigi's core mechanics are relegated to the option menu. It's a relief to see Nintendo finally doing something to address this persistent problem in its catalog of games.

One of the few areas where Paper Jam stumbles is making players track down paper Toads who have hidden themselves in panic upon entering Mario & Luigi's three-dimensional world. You have many fun moments outside the main mechanics, like riding atop giant papercraft creation for battle, but scouring dedicated areas for hidden Toads is less entertaining. Even worse, finding most of the Toads is required to finish the game.

One of the nicest things I can say about the Mario & Luigi and Paper Mario games is how consistent they are at offering interesting and funny RPG experiences for those not necessarily inclined towards the genre. Paper Jam doesn't disappoint while not dramatically changing the formula previously established, but it ranks high in the Mario RPG pantheon thanks to its improvements in pace, willingness to trust its players to figure out the mechanics, and its goofy multi-Mario-verse premise. » **Kyle Hilliard**



PLAYSTATION 4		
Amplitude	7.75	Feb-16
Assassin's Creed Syndicate	9	Dec-15
Bloodborne: The Old Hunters	9.25	Jan-16
Call of Duty: Black Ops III	9	Dec-15
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
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WWE 2K16	6.25	Jan-16

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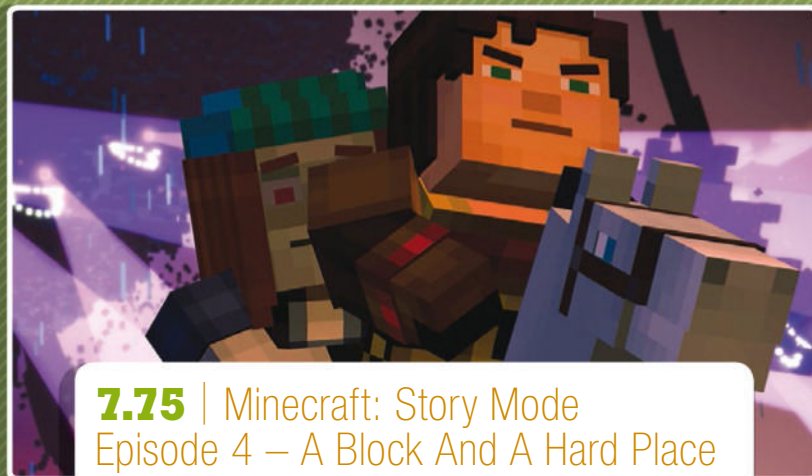


5 | Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC Release January 12 Rating T

Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India is a disappointment. Outside of the gorgeous, painted art style, it has few redeeming features. The frenzied pacing of levels turned away the stealth enthusiast in me, and the unreliable controls left me miserable during the time trials.

– Javy Gwaltney



7.75 | Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 4 – A Block And A Hard Place

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Mac, iOS, Android Release December 22 Rating E10+

Despite the grievances I have with the action and impact on the story, this is an enjoyable and evenly paced episode that effectively wraps up the Wither Storm arc for Minecraft: Story Mode, and delivers an ending that tugs on players' heartstrings. – Brian Shea



8.25 | Badland 2

Platform iOS Release December 17 Rating 9+

Without reinventing the concept, Badland 2 strives towards new mechanics and variations on its core design. Precision-focused gameplay make this a deeper experience than it might first seem, and developer Frogmind once again manages to rise above most mobile competitors. – Matt Miller

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Transformers: Devastation	8	Dec-15
WRC 5	6	Jan-16
WWE 2K16	6.25	Jan-16

PLAYSTATION 3

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Room Three, The	8	Jan-16

geeked at birth



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Forged For The Hardcore

Decades after its release, enthusiasm for Weaponlord's complex fighting action is as sharp as ever

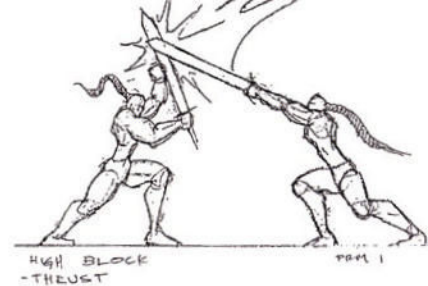
The early era of fighting games could fill a virtual graveyard with false starts, obscurities, and outright failures. One would-be contender struggled to gain a mass audience at launch, but has maintained a rabid following of the hardcore faithful in the decades since it took its first bloody swing. In this month's Classic, we look at Weaponlord. **by Jeff Cork**

James Goddard's resume is loaded with one megahit and cult favorite after the other. He worked at Capcom in the '90s, where he made a significant mark as co-lead designer of Street Fighter II Hyper Fighting's rebalancing. He later designed Super Street Fighter II's kickboxer Dee Jay. The old Alien vs. Predator beat-em-up?

Goddard pitched the concept to Capcom.

Goddard eventually moved to Namco, where he picked up the baton on another game that was still early in development. "It was going to be a four-player fighter, which predates Smash Bros., which just wasn't going to run at a decent frame rate and

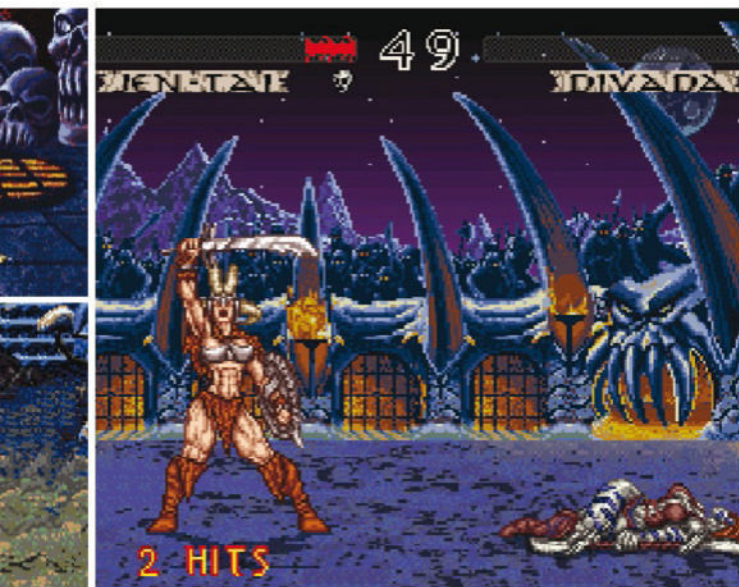
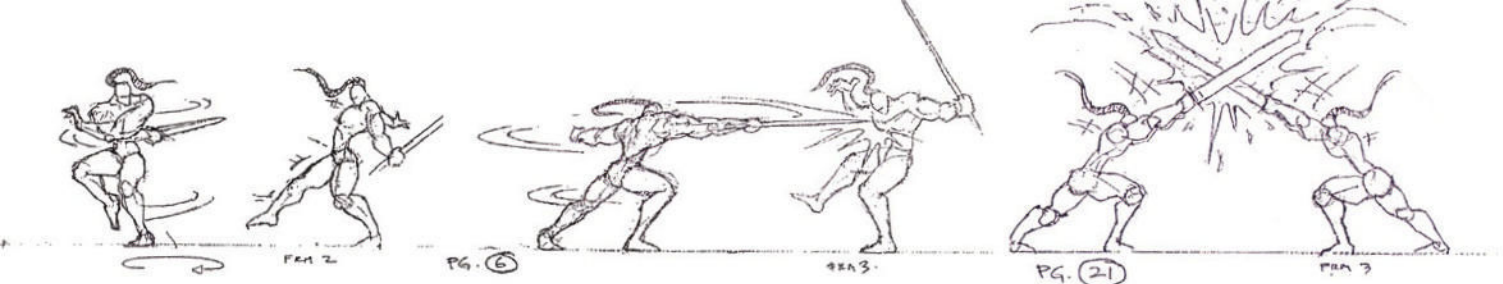
decent sized sprites on the Super Nintendo and the Sega Genesis," Goddard says. "Ken Lobb had just left Namco and gone to Nintendo, and that wasn't unfortunately technically possible. It was way ahead of its time." Rather than scrap it entirely, they used it as a skeleton for what would become Weaponlord.



Since Goddard had previously worked on the Street Fighter franchise, a one-on-one fighter seemed like the best direction for a new game, but Goddard and co-creator Dave Winstead also had plenty of new ideas. They knew they wanted to create a game centered on weapon-to-weapon clashing since those were a rarity at the time. Their creativity took off from there, soon turning into, "Let's break weapons," Goddard recalls. "And let's make fatalities that you combo into them; you don't just put in Morse code. That's how it started."

Steven Chiang was lead programmer on the project at developer Visual Concepts, and he recalls those early days fondly. "The fun was just the brainstorming and the random crap from sitting around. We weren't even drinking – we were in like Taco Bell and drinking soda," he says. "And we'd come up with these over-the-top ideas. 'Oh wouldn't it be badass if you could cut the guy's head off and you could do a power move and the brain would come out and jiggle on the ground?' 'What if you did a power move and you gut him and his guts come out?' But the cool part about it was you'd have this conversation, and a few days later you'd be playing with something."

Goddard's insistence that Weaponlord not just ape Street



Fighter led to the game's somewhat notorious reputation. In many ways Weaponlord was ahead of its time, featuring massive sprites and a variety of in-depth systems, including an innovative active parrying system, weapons and costume elements that could be broken, and a combo system that was more sophisticated than most fighting games. It also supported online play via the XBAND peripheral. That depth came at a cost, however, requiring players to master moves where you would perform a motion and press a button as well as ones where you had to hold and release buttons while inputting the correct motions. For casual players who were accustomed to Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat, it was overwhelming – especially considering each character had 10 or more special moves to memorize.

"Let's come up with categories of things that are badass and counter each other, and then give them to everybody, but in a different way," Goddard says, laughing. "I thought I was adding depth. It all made sense at the time, and we were really going into uncharted territories. We all were able to play the game no problem, so it seemed like sensible stuff."

The game's complexity didn't help, but perhaps it was simple timing that brought the lethal blow to the game. Goddard says

Weaponlord was originally set for a July 1995 release, but a ROM shortage meant the game would be delayed to October on Genesis. Instead of releasing the SNES and Genesis games on different dates, Namco decided to wait to release both in October. That move meant it hit shelves after the home port of Killer Instinct and the PlayStation launch.

Goddard said that before the launch there were about 700,000 preorders, but sales suffered because of the delay. "The timing was awful. That really didn't help. Had it been out a little sooner, more people would have played it, but they would have still faced the same play challenges. Would more hardcore players have adopted it? I don't know. It's amazing to this day how many people will say, 'Oh, you did that game?'"

Even if it didn't set any sales records, critical reception was strong, earning a high 9 score in *Game Informer* from editor-in-chief Andy McNamara. "Overall, this is the ultimate fighting freak's fighting game," he wrote in his review.

Goddard is now design director of Killer Instinct, where he continues to hone his fighting-game skills. Chiang co-founded Tiberon, which develops a variety of EA's sports games. He's now EVP of Worldwide Production and Studios at Warner Bros. Interactive. ♦

Why Weaponlord?

I spoke with several players who have kept the Weaponlord torch burning all these years. While their appreciation for the game is similar, it was striking how they latched onto different facets of the game.

Alvin Cartuyvels bought the SNES version of the game on launch day, partially because the game supported XBAND. A competitive fighting-game fan to this day, Cartuyvels and his friends became obsessed with Weaponlord's combo system, and the amount of flexibility that it provided. "They kept it open to the point where you can do certain moves, and if it doesn't knock the opponent down, there's probably another button that you can push to keep that combo going," he says. He and his friends would routinely stay up until dawn trying to devise the longest combos.

Cartuyvels lives in Chicago, which is where Killer Instinct-developer Iron Galaxy Studios is headquartered. There, he met Weaponlord designer James Goddard. The two geeked out about the game, and eventually met up again to record an extensive video walkthrough of the game's systems and grisly high-level gameplay.

George Sellas and his brothers routinely rented Weaponlord as kids, in part because the competitive format gave the three more time at the controls. While he says he was a good but not great player, the look of the characters stayed with Sellas. "I've always been a big fan of Robert Howard and his original Conan stories, and things like that, so I gravitated to it," he says. "It spoke to my sensibilities; it was something very different from the more Asian or eastern aesthetics of Street Fighter or Mortal Kombat."

Sellas has recently applied his skills to creating reworked versions of the characters, showing what they might look like today. Goddard is a fan of the results, saying that he can almost imagine playing it with the fresh visuals.

That's not to say that you should feel guilty if you've never heard about the game before. It's not exactly a household name, according to fighting-game fixture Seth Killian, who is currently spearheading the creation of Rising Thunder. "I don't think many people even within the fighting game community know much about Weaponlord, but it definitely gets props from fighting game historians," he says. "During a period of great stagnation in fighters, Weaponlord combined a straight-up bonkers number of new gameplay mechanics, many of which would be replicated in other games later on. It looked like a totally metal, mindless gore-fest, but had a ton of interesting things happening under the hood."



Here's a look at one of George Sellas' reimagined screens, with Glenn Kim's original Weaponlord background

Who Said It?

Match the Star Wars quotes to the speaker.



HAN SOLO



YODA



QUI-GON JINN



LANDO CALRISSIAN



PRINCESS LEIA



VICEROY NUTE GUNRAY



C-3PO



BOBA FETT



OBI-WAN KENOBI



QUEEN AMIDALA

1. Boba Fett 2. Han Solo 3. C-3PO 4. Obi-Wan Kenobi 5. Princess Leia 6. Qui-Gon Jinn 7. Yoda 8. Queen Amidala 9. Viceroy Nute Gunray 10. Lando Calrissian

Two irresistible flavors

I can't believe they're making
a megastar like me do this.

Hey, I know those guys.





1. "Get him, Dad, get him. Fire!"

.....

2. "We came to rescue you, it was his idea."

.....

3. "Don't call me a mindless philosopher, you overweight glob of grease."

.....

4. "Obi-Wan. Now that's a name I have not heard in a long time."

.....

5. "You came in that thing? You're braver than I thought."

.....

6. "You almost got us killed! Are you brainless?"

.....

7. "How embarrassing. How embarrassing."

.....

8. "We live in a real world, come back to it."

.....

9. "Are you brain dead?"

.....

10. "What have you done to my ship?"

.....

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under 200 calories.

I don't like the way people are looking at us.



I better be getting paid overtime for this.



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